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## Omaha Beach : a tragedy of errors

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **OMAHA BEACH: A TRAGEDY OF ERRORS**

**by**

**David P. Stanley**

The American assault on the small strip of sand code-named Omaha Beach, has become one of the most longstanding examples of American military triumph. Yet, at the same time, it is an event synonymous with death and destruction. There, in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, over 3000 American soldiers either lost their lives or were wounded in an attempt to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds and an enemy force that was ready for their arrival.

The assault on Omaha was not one that had been briefly or incompletely planned. In fact, it was over a year in the making, and those who were responsible for the invasion felt that they had created some of the best and most precise plans to ensure a rapid envelopment of the beachfront and German defensive positions. Many factors had been included in their planning: the time of day, the tidal conditions, the German troops present at the time of the invasion, the need for dominance in the air, the need for armored forces that were able to swim ashore under their own power and the need for the largest naval armada that the World had ever seen. However, even with all of these factors taken into consideration, much of what was planned went wrong in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944. Too much time had been spent focusing on what would go right, and not enough time was spent focusing on what could go wrong with the assault.

**OMAHA BEACH: A TRAGEDY OF ERRORS**

**by  
David P. Stanley**

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**APPROVAL PAGE**

**OMAHA BEACH: A TRAGEDY OF ERRORS**

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To those who fought and died on both sides of the beach.

May their struggle be not soon forgotten.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 THE BEACH, THE RAID AND THE PLANS.....	6
3 BATTLESHIPS AND BOMBERS.....	30
4 SWIMMING TANKS AND ENGINEERS.....	56
5 THE FIRST WAVE OF INFANTRY.....	78
6 CONCLUSION.....	96
7 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	105

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

As the many landing craft carrying the men of Company A, from the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, slogged their way toward their objective on Omaha Beach on the early morning of June 6, 1944, the well-laid plans of the military command were already unraveling in the face of an assault that had hardly even begun. The men of Company A, like all of the other men who were to come ashore on Omaha Beach that day, had been told that the German defenses on the beach would be eliminated by both a heavy aerial as well as a precise and effective naval bombardment. In fact, to say that the aerial bombardment had been inaccurate in that it had no impact on the invasion would be more than an understatement, and the supposedly precise naval fire had not done its job in the time that it had been allocated.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the men of Company A came ashore under some of the most withering enemy fire of the entire D-Day operation. Within moments, the Company had suffered 66% casualties.<sup>2</sup>

While the decimation of Company A was extreme even for the horror of Omaha Beach, it reflected the situation that befell many of the men who waded ashore that day. Why had the men come ashore under the false pretext that they would be facing little to no enemy resistance on the beaches? What had gone wrong to produce such high casualties amongst the assaulting infantry?

This thesis seeks to explain what it was that took place on the morning of June 6, 1944, during the initial assault on a small strip of sand, code-named Omaha Beach, along

the Normandy coastline. Many current authors have described the tragedy of the assault on Omaha Beach, yet few have attempted to explain why it was that the Americans suffered such grievous casualties, not at the hands of elite German troop resistance, but, in fact, at the hands of assault plans that were too rigid and too unbending in the face of challenges made by the weather and by the fact that the assault itself did not proceed as had been planned. The assault on Omaha Beach was a seemingly endless stream of mishaps and errors that were due to the rigidity of the schedule and also to conditions that had changed completely since the assault was planned.

It is not the intent of this author to explain the events that unfolded throughout the entire D-Day assault, but, rather, to explain what happened to the initial assault forces that landed on Omaha Beach. In order to do this, the thesis has been broken down into individual chapters that seek to explain particular phases of the initial assault, and what consequences these would have on the subsequent troops landings.

Chapter Two will explain, in brief, what the German military had done to prepare the French coast for the inevitable Cross-Channel invasion. This chapter will also discuss the failed raid on the French port of Dieppe in 1942 and the implications that it had on the planning of the invasion of Normandy. Finally, the chapter will explain the decision to invade at Normandy, and what the plans for the disastrous assault on Omaha Beach exactly were.

Chapter Three will delve into the role that the Allied Naval and Air Forces were to play at Omaha. Both services had particular objectives that needed to be completed by the time that the infantry waded ashore. What were these objectives, and were they carried out?

Chapter Four will explain the role and performance of the armored forces at Omaha, while also explaining in smaller detail the role of the engineers who were given the task of clearing the beach for the subsequent infantry assaults. Both the engineers and the armored forces suffered heavily at Omaha. The question that is raised in this chapter is why did they suffer so heavily, and what implications did their suffering have on the infantry?

Chapter Five will discuss the assaulting infantry and the performances of the men who were brought ashore under the false pretense of a safe landing. These men suffered heavily due to the performances of the branches of the armed services that were discussed in the previous chapters. It was the infantry that bore the brunt of the German fire, and it was the heroism of the infantrymen that is remembered today.

The final chapter will be the Conclusion. This chapter will attempt to tie all of the previously outlined material together so that it has some semblance of logic. While there is no simple answer to why the assault on Omaha Beach went the way that it did, this thesis will hopefully dispel a certain amount of the myths and nationalist rhetoric that have come to surround this dreadful day. No one account of the events that took place on Omaha Beach will satisfy all military historians and enthusiasts, but the present work will attempt to come as close as possible to creating a true sense of what happened during the initial assault on Omaha Beach.

Throughout this thesis, this author has chosen to draw heavily from source material that was found at the United States Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. From the archives at the War College were found records and battle orders from the time of the assault, as well as some from before the assault ever took place. Upon reading

other historians' sources for books written about the assault on Omaha Beach, it is clear that the majority of the historians have not used any of the material that this author uncovered at the War College. All too often, historians have tended to rely almost solely on the personal accounts of the men who were present at the time of the invasion. While these men's accounts of their own harrowing experiences are helpful when attempting to explain the events that unfolded on Omaha Beach, they are not the sole source of information. This author believes that the materials found at the War College provide this thesis with a fresh look at an event that many historians have chosen to study, yet few have taken the time to research to its fullest potential.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 1

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<sup>1</sup> COMINCH P-006. "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force. Ch. 2, pg. 7[U.S. Army War College, Carlisle PA]

<sup>2</sup> Morrison, Samuel Elliot. The Invasion Of France And Germany. Edison: Castle Books, 1957. pg. 136



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE BEACH, THE RAID AND THE PLANS**

Omaha Beach was the code-name given to the 7500 yards of sand that was to be assaulted in the early hours of June 6, 1944. It was a beach that was backed by what are described as “sheer cliffs” in some places.<sup>1</sup> Where there were not sheer cliffs, there were areas where the terrain ascended steeply up to 100 feet in a short distance from the beach. There were few natural exits off the beach, and those that did exist, the German defenders had blocked by means of concrete walls and anti-tank ditches. Any assaulting force would be hard pressed to find an easy exit off of Omaha Beach, not only due to the German defenses, but also because of geographical features that made exiting the beach treacherous even under “normal” conditions.

Since December 1943, the German soldiers under the direct command of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had increased their efforts to make the French coastline defensible against an inevitable Allied assault, but only since the early Spring of 1944, were their efforts truly increased.<sup>2</sup> Rommel, the commander who had suffered grievously at the hands of Allied airpower in North Africa, fully understood the potential that the Allies had when it came to the inevitable invasion. He knew that it was up to him to strengthen Hitler’s Atlantic Wall to the point where it could be utilized to resist the invasion at its weakest state—when the men were wading ashore. Rommel believed that if the Germans could throw the enemy back into the sea, “it would be a long time until they returned...”.<sup>3</sup> If the Germans could not immediately repel the enemy invasion

forces, Rommel knew all too well that once the Allies had established a secure foothold on the Continent, they would not be dislodged, and the end of the Third Reich would be at hand.<sup>4</sup>

Hitler's dreaded, and even icon-like, Atlantic Wall was merely a myth created by German propaganda. It was not, as the average German citizen imagined, a reinforced concrete wall that stretched from Norway to Southern France. In fact, all it was in reality was a series of concrete pillboxes and machinegun nests that stretched along the aforementioned coastline. It was in no way impregnable when Rommel inspected it in December 1943. Indeed, after completion of the inspection, Rommel himself referred to the Wall as, "an enormous bluff".<sup>5</sup> The Atlantic Wall was not a continuous line of defenses as Hitler and his propaganda ministers made it seem, but it was still an obstacle to be considered; one fortified especially around coastal ports where the Germans had solidified their positions to protect the vital access to the English Channel.<sup>6</sup>

After his inspection of The Wall, in December 1943, Rommel was given command of Army Group B, which was comprised of two armies in France and the Northern Countries. The majority of the men Rommel had at his disposal were not in prime physical shape, nor were their equipment and supplies adequate for the task at hand. Rommel lacked armored forces and sufficient artillery to attain his goal of throwing the enemy back into the sea. Even though he repeatedly petitioned Hitler for additional mobile forces, his requests were denied.

The French coast, or Western theatre, was not Hitler's priority. He was completely engrossed with the war against the Russians in the East. It was in the East that the majority of German manpower and supplies was going, and not to the static

Western Front. Even though the men who were manning the Atlantic Wall were not in the best shape<sup>\*</sup>, and they lacked fuel and sufficient equipment, these men were determined to fight on to stop the Allies.

The German plan for the defeat of the invasion was to stop the invasion fleet in the Channel and to smash the forces that made it ashore as they struggled on the beaches.<sup>7</sup> To do this, Rommel planned to use an assortment of obstacles and mines<sup>†</sup> that would hinder landing craft from coming ashore. The obstacles could also be used to force men into small areas where they could be isolated and destroyed. Rommel knew that he needed to place mines and obstacles on the beaches in such a way that they would be effective regardless of the tidal conditions. His plan was to lay more mines per month than had been laid in the previous 3-1/2 year period prior to his taking command!<sup>8</sup>

It was under these conditions of improved beaches that the Allies would eventually land on June 6, 1944. Not all of the beaches were as well defended as others, and the beaches on the Pas-de-Calais region, which was the region where the German High Command expected the invasion to come, were more heavily defended. Even though it was expected that the invasion would come in the North, the beaches of Normandy on the Cotentin Peninsula were formidable.

The German defensive positions established on Omaha were not yet in the state of completion that Rommel would have liked once the Allies landed. Although they were not “complete”, the defenses at Omaha Beach mounted the most weapons of any of the

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<sup>\*</sup> Some of the men manning the Atlantic Wall came from units that had been decimated in the East. They were sent West to the static front to recuperate. One unit was known for its prevailing stomach ailments and others were full of men who suffered from frostbite. Since it was in the East that the Germans needed fresh men, the Western Wall was defended by more than one and a half million men who were over 34 years old!

invasion beaches on D-Day. There were 18 anti-tank guns of a caliber ranging from 37-88mm, there were 6 mortars and 85 machineguns, all concentrated to provide the defenders with enfilading fire along the beach.<sup>9</sup> The men who assaulted Omaha were the only men of the entire invasion to face German rockets. There were 38 rocket emplacements, containing 4 32cm rockets each, which provided fire along the beach. According to a report issued by an Army Operational Research Group, there were 11.3 machineguns per 1000 yards on Omaha. This gave the beach the distinction of being the most heavily defended beach of the entire invasion.<sup>10</sup>

The defensive positions that ran along Omaha were mostly made of reinforced concrete and were buried in the sides of the cliffs that rose above the beach. The positions were connected by reinforced tunnels and slit trenches that provided safe access between them. During the time of the assault, the naval vessels which were to provide the close support that the men on the beaches so needed, were unable to see the enemy guns as they fired on the men who were struggling on the beach. This was because the German guns had been built into the sides of the cliffs with their seaward sides reinforced and hidden from the ships that were patrolling offshore. The guns did not fire out to sea, but rather fired down the beaches where they could pour devastating fire on any men who slogged their way across the sand in front of them. Since the guns did not fire out to sea, the Allied ships could not see the telltale smoke rising from exposed barrels.<sup>11</sup>

One method of defense that the Germans employed was to utilize captured French tank turrets mounted on top of concrete emplacements. These turrets could rotate and provide fire on the beaches while remaining relatively impervious to small arms fire.

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<sup>†</sup> It is said that Rommel was somewhat obsessed with mines. Once, when taking a tour of a porcelain factory, Rommel was preoccupied with thinking about mines. He did not care about the artistic qualities of

Along with captured tank turrets, the Germans used 88mm and 75mm guns along with 50mm mortars. These larger emplacements that housed the anti-tank guns and mortars were protected by machineguns that provided sweeping fire along the beach. The Germans had destroyed any physical features along the beach that could provide obstruction to the vision of the defenders.<sup>12</sup> All houses that were on the beach were destroyed—there was no section of the beach that was not known or pre-sighted by the defenders.

The beach itself was not free of German defenses. Running along the waterline, and in the water, were mines mounted on wooden poles that were designed to destroy advancing landing craft. There were metal railroad ties that had been cut on angles and welded together to form asterisk shaped obstacles known as “hedgehogs”. These obstacles and mines had been placed at the high tide watermark. Rommel figured that the Allies would come at high tide when there would be less beach for the troops to cross, so his initial work had been done to protect this area. This did not mean that work had not begun to protect the low water area of the beach. Rommel desired to eventually have obstacles in place to cover both the high and low tide marks. This would have made a landing under any tide truly treacherous and costly to an assaulting force. According to one author, “Omaha resembled nothing so much as a giant trap.”<sup>13</sup>

Leading off the beach were the four main exits that were to be vital both for the defenders to maintain control of, and for the assaulting troops to seize. Each exit led to a town in the Normandy countryside. The beach exits led to the towns of Vierville-sur-Mer, Les Moulins, St. Laurent-sur-Mer, and Colleville-sur-Mer. Each of these towns would serve as vital transportation hubs for the Americans when they landed.

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the porcelain, but asked if it could be used to waterproof mines that would be used on the beaches.

Each exit was heavily defended by German artillery and machineguns.<sup>14</sup> The exit at Colleville was protected by two separate emplacements with a combined total of two 75mm guns, one 88mm gun, three 50mm anti-tank guns, two 50mm mortars, and five concrete emplaced machinegun nests. Each position had other machinegun emplacements that were not made of reinforced concrete, but were open to the air and placed in trenches. There was also an anti-tank ditch in place that would be used to slow down advancing armor so that it could be picked off by the guns from above.

Aside from the obstacles, there were German troops stationed at the defenses. This is where one of the most over-exaggerated portions of the history of the assault on Omaha begins. The men who were in place to defend Omaha belonged to the 352<sup>nd</sup> Division. They had been moved forward to the beach to aid in its defense in March of 1944. The French Resistance attempted, via carrier pigeons, to notify the Allies of this change in the defenses, but German soldiers shot the pigeons and the message was never received.<sup>15</sup> It was not until the soldiers began landing on Omaha that the American command had any idea that they were facing the 352<sup>nd</sup> Division.

The 352<sup>nd</sup> Division has been referred to as an elite division, or a crack division. According to author Samuel Mitcham, this was not the case.<sup>16</sup> It had been created seven months prior to the invasion. Yes, the men that made up its ranks had experience fighting in Russia, but the 352<sup>nd</sup> was created by combining two separate divisions which had been mauled in the East. The men were veterans, but they were veterans of a different type of warfare—warfare on the Russian front.

The men of the 352<sup>nd</sup> Division had been trained not in stationary coastal defense, but in counterattack. They were trained to quickly organize and repel an enemy force as

it moved inland. The Division was, according to British Intelligence, made up of Russians and Poles, “and its morale was not regarded as of the highest.”<sup>17</sup> This information came from an Armed Service report that was issued in August 1945. A report issued in October 1944, by the Naval Commander-In-Chief, referred to the chaos on Omaha as being the responsibility of “first-class German troops...”<sup>18</sup>

One possible reason for the latter depiction of the 352<sup>nd</sup> as a more experienced Division may be that the coastal defense battalion that was also manning the defenses was of lesser quality. Compared to these men, the men of the 352<sup>nd</sup> may have seemed significantly more elite, or well trained. It seems as though the 352<sup>nd</sup> Division has become somewhat mythical in its qualities since D-Day. There is no doubt that the men who made up the Division were well-trained, and battle tested, but, to call them an elite, or crack, division is just not true. The fact that Allied Intelligence did not know that the 352<sup>nd</sup> was even at Omaha is the more serious issue.<sup>19</sup> Since the men who came ashore did so under the impression that they would be facing a static infantry division, the 716<sup>th</sup>, and not a static division that had been reinforced by a veteran division, it is of no surprise that there was utter confusion. Instead of admitting an intelligence error, the Allies have portrayed the 352<sup>nd</sup> as an elite Division that happened to appear at Omaha Beach a few days prior to the invasion. As explained earlier, this is not true! They had been in the Omaha region for three months. Yes, they had reserves, and yes, they were a mobile Division, but, no, they were not elite. They only became elite after they were made so by Allied Intelligence and by the persistence of a myth that exists in most accounts of the assault on Omaha.

The German defenses that had been established were indeed formidable, but they were not as complete as Rommel had hoped, and the men who were responsible for their completion were running out of time in the Spring of 1944. To the Allied planners with whom the responsibility of planning the largest invasion in history lay, the appearance of Field Marshal Rommel and his newly developed system of defense must have been daunting.

An amphibious assault launched against a fortified position is one of the most risky and dangerous operations that any military commander can be forced to deal with. Since the Americans had joined the war against Germany, there had been four major amphibious assaults with American forces only taking place in large numbers in three of them. All of the previous amphibious operations were launched under different conditions than the Normandy invasion, and all but one were in the Mediterranean.

The only amphibious assault that took place out of the Mediterranean was the failed 1942 raid on Dieppe, France. This raid was a tragedy of errors that cost the Canadian military, subordinate to the British, extremely high casualties.

In August 1942, the British Chiefs of Staff developed a plan to quell the demands of both the Americans and the besieged Russian allies.<sup>20</sup> The plan called for a 48-hour raid on the French coast. The goals of the raid were to alert the Germans to the threat of an invasion, forcing them to send troops from the East to the West, and most importantly, to provide a base of knowledge for the eventual Cross-Channel invasion of France. In reality, the raid served one purpose; it boosted the morale of the troops who were manning the Atlantic Wall.<sup>21</sup>



The raid on Dieppe was planned by British General Montgomery who had been removed from the fighting in North Africa to plan the operation. Serving under the British Army were forces of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The Canadians made up the bulk of the raiding force, and would be given the task of destroying the German military installations around Dieppe. The British planners wanted to know for future reference if it would be possible to capture a well-defended French port.<sup>22</sup> Winston Churchill was rather nervous about the notion of sending a raiding party against a heavily defended position, but he was reassured by the successes of a few past British Commando raids against smaller German installations.

The plan called for British Commandos to land on the flanks of the invasion force, where they would destroy the German batteries that had been set up to rake the approaches and beaches with heavy fire. The Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division was then to land with the support of armor and to set about destroying other German emplacements.

In theory, this seemed like a sound plan; but in reality it was anything but sound. The British Navy, out of fear of the still active German Navy and Luftwaffe, was unwilling to allow any vessels larger than a destroyer into the English Channel. This meant that the men who were assaulting the beaches of Dieppe would not have heavy fire support from large caliber naval guns. This factor would play a key role in leading to the disastrous outcome of the raid.

On the morning of August 19<sup>th</sup>, the raid was launched. There were new British Churchill tanks with snorkels that allowed them to operate in water, there were new landing craft that had been designed to carry the tanks in, there was naval support from destroyers and there were Allied fighters swarming overhead where they engaged

German planes in dramatic dogfights. None of these factors helped the men who landed on the beaches.

From the outset, the plans were ineffective. The specialized Churchill tanks were utterly useless under the conditions that they faced at Dieppe. The water-smoothed stones that made up the coastline prevented the tanks from gaining a grip as they struggled ashore. The tanks, which the men had been promised would knock out the German machineguns, were a failure. Those tanks that made it ashore became penned up in small isolated areas between anti-tank obstacles. When the obstacles trapped them, the tanks became nothing more than large targets for the German gunners to shoot at. In the end, 28 tanks were lost either to accurate German fire or to foundering in the water. After the raid, it was noted that tanks should not come ashore until enemy obstacles were cleared by either bombing or by naval fire. This decision played heavily into the planning for Omaha Beach. It was soon realized that there would be a need for specialized armor, or tanks with special aquatic capabilities. During the period between Dieppe and Normandy, specialized armor was created. This will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.

Of the 5000 men put ashore at Dieppe, 3500 were either killed or wounded, 90% of these being Canadian troops. The men who came ashore found the German defenses solidly emplaced and well armed. The naval forces that lingered off the shore were unable to provide fire support with any large caliber weaponry. The guns of the destroyers were simply too small to be used as the sole fire support for an invasion. An after action report issued by the British stated that, "Fire support must be provided by

heavy and medium Naval bombardment.” The report goes on to state that, †“The Lesson of Greatest Importance is the need for overwhelming fire support, including close support during the initial stages of the attack.”<sup>23</sup>

The report also calls for close support by naval gunboats and other support craft. It was recognized after the failed raid that the men who were wading ashore and attempting to cut through barbed wire and dismantle obstacles were extremely vulnerable to enemy fire, and therefore should be provided with close support from naval vessels offshore.<sup>24</sup> According to the report, there were no existing naval vessels that could perform this duty.<sup>§</sup>

Aside from the need for close support craft that could follow the landing craft into the shore, there was recognized a need for heavy and medium naval vessels.<sup>25</sup> These larger warships could not get as close to the shore as a shallow draft ship or a destroyer, but they could use their significantly heavier firepower to both neutralize enemy positions and, most importantly to cause the enemy to keep his head down. These large ships, cruisers and battleships, would rely on forward shore parties or specialized spotter aircraft to call in fire for them. They would be needed to provide both direct and indirect fire<sup>\*\*</sup> support for the men who were attempting to wade ashore.

One of the most glaring omissions of the Dieppe raid was the use of high level bombers that could have been employed in great numbers to both destroy German

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† Capitalization added by the authors, presumably to denote the importance of the statement.

§ New shallow draught vessels were needed to perform the close support that was lacking at Dieppe. By the time that the Normandy invasion took place, this problem had been somewhat solved by the creation of L.C.G.s, or Landing Craft Guns.

\*\* Indirect fire is the process of using artillery to fire at a target that it cannot see. This process became utilized with deadly efficiency for the first time in the First World War. The addition of forward observers or spotter aircraft that could redirect the fire led to higher accuracy and deadlier effect. For weeks after the Normandy invasion offshore naval vessels continued to provide indirect fire support for the troops who were battling in the Norman hedgerows.

defenses and more importantly, to neutralize obstacles and mines that would later slow down the advancing troops. In the After Action Report, the writers state that the lack of high-level bombers was due to the lack of availability of American B-17 Flying Fortresses. They also state that a preemptive aerial bombardment would have been nothing more than an inaccurate exercise that could have served no other purpose than to forewarn the Germans that an invasion was imminent.<sup>26</sup>

After stating that the bombing would have been inaccurate and simply an inconvenience because of the fact that it could have created rubble that the armor would have had trouble negotiating<sup>††</sup>, the writers state in defense of this point, “The moral effect of a heavy raid and the dislocation that it causes cannot be overlooked.”<sup>27</sup> No, the moral result of having high level bombers dropping even inaccurately placed bombs on an enemy position cannot be overlooked. High level bombing is as much a weapon of destruction as it is a weapon of psychological warfare. Even though it could have been useful at Dieppe, it is important to remember that the Luftwaffe was still a significant threat in 1942. By the time of the Normandy invasion, this threat had been eliminated, and the use of high, medium, and low-level bombers along with gliders and parachute infantry was possible due to a complete lack of German air cover.

The only air cover that the men who took part in the Dieppe fiasco had was that of British Spitfire fighters equipped with cannons and machineguns. While these airplanes were effective against exposed German positions and troops, it is essential to note that cannon and machinegun fire cannot be used to destroy concrete emplacements. It is not implied that close air support is not vital in an invasion, but it is not sufficient when it is the sole air support that an invasion force has at its disposal.

One last major implication of the costly failure of Dieppe was the misuse of landing craft. Landing craft, whether they are carrying men, tanks, or artillery, cannot linger in the surf too long. They are large; they are slow; and they are perfect targets for enemy gunners who can systematically knock them out and cause utter confusion and mayhem at a landing sight. At Dieppe, the landing sites became clogged with large partially destroyed landing craft. According to the After Action Report, landing craft received the majority of the enemy fire, and accordingly suffered the greatest losses.<sup>28</sup> It became clear to the military planners that large landing craft needed to deposit their troops or weapons as quickly as possible so that they did not become slow moving targets for German gunners.

So, what does a recap of the history of Dieppe have to do with the events that unfolded on Omaha Beach? Understanding the errors made at Dieppe helps to clarify the decisions that were made prior to the invasion, and most importantly, these examples of military mishaps are important when studying the similar errors made on Omaha.

The planning for the entire invasion began long before the possibility of an invasion was truly feasible. In December 1943, American General Dwight Eisenhower was named Supreme Commander<sup>29</sup> of both the invasion and the subsequent campaign to rid Europe of Nazi oppression. Eisenhower utilized his managerial skills to meld together the British and American plans and different ideas for the perfect amphibious invasion. The British had led the planning for the amphibious operations in North Africa and Italy, and they preferred invasions that were based on tactical surprise.<sup>30</sup>

Surprise was indeed important for an invasion of a well-defended position, and the British had, in the invasions earlier in the war, stressed the exploitation of darkness to

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<sup>††</sup> This implies that the armor would have to have made it ashore for this to be a factor.

cover their movements.<sup>31</sup> Darkness was beneficial to an invasion force. Under the cover of darkness, it could approach an enemy shore and launch raids to knock out forward positions. Once the initial assaults had knocked out forward emplacements, the larger landings could begin.

To provide tactical surprise, the British did not use long naval bombardments that would make the target region well notified of imminent danger. The Americans, on the other hand, traditionally preferred the Pacific-style long- term naval bombardments that could last days. The problem with this strategy was that it would alert the enemy to the danger long before the invasion came. On the Pacific atolls and islands this was feasible since the Japanese soldiers were geographically isolated, but the Germans manning the Atlantic Wall would have the benefit of having two separate Armies behind them that could be forewarned by the bombardment and brought forward to await the invasion forces.

Eventually, the Americans played a subordinate role to the British in the wartime amphibious operations in the Mediterranean, and they adopted nighttime tactics. However, once planning for the invasion of Europe began, the British saw that the best bet would be a daylight invasion. According to a British War Cabinet report from July 1943, daylight was seen as most beneficial to the naval forces. The report stated that, “the main assault should take place in daylight...in order to achieve the density of landing envisioned by the Army.” It goes on to say that, “The initial landing should take place about three hours before high water in order to be able to land a reasonably sized supporting force on the first tide.”<sup>32</sup>

It is important to remember that since the raid on Dieppe, lessons concerning close support and air bombardments had been learned and seen as necessary for a successful assault on the Atlantic Wall. As a result of these considerations, daylight was seen as vital for providing the naval and air forces with the visibility that they would need to provide maximum covering fire. Not only would an early morning invasion benefit the accuracy of the bombardments, but the timing would also allow for maximum usage of the tides throughout the day.

British General Montgomery, having learned much since the failure of Dieppe, recognized the need for American high-level bombers. The bombers could be used to destroy fixed emplacements as well as obstacles that littered the beaches. His strategy for the invasion that he was to command<sup>33</sup> would rely on American heavy daylight bombers. By having the American Eighth Air Force at his disposal, Montgomery began to shift further and further from the traditional British amphibious doctrine. This is why the decision to invade during the early morning hours came to pass. Montgomery's plans were heavily reliant on the success of the bombers. The bombers were to clear the way for the following infantry and armor. If the bombers failed, the plans were significantly less feasible than ever before.

It was Montgomery's plans that dictated the D-Day invasion, but it was American resources that made the entire operation possible. The United States was to provide the daylight bombers that Montgomery's plans hinged upon. American General Omar Bradley was given command of the American First United States Army, or FUSA, in 1943. It was FUSA, under Bradley's leadership, which would make the landings at Normandy.

Bradley had served under Montgomery in the Mediterranean and had become accustomed to the British nighttime landings. It took significant convincing by Montgomery to sway Bradley into seeing things his way.<sup>34</sup> Bradley was deeply influenced by the British notions of surprise landings, and he did not support the use of a long Pacific-style naval bombardment to soften up the beaches. This factor weighed heavily on the seemingly short duration of the naval bombardment that took place on Omaha prior to the assault. Bradley was also influenced by Montgomery's notions of the use of heavy bombers to destroy German resistance. The American plans were, in effect, dictated by Montgomery's misguided reliance on a battle tested and inaccurate weapon system. Bradley thought that the lack of tactical surprise that would be caused by a daylight invasion would be overcome by the naval and aerial bombardments that were planned. Bradley, in his postwar account of the war, wrote that, "for in ramming our way ashore against the fortified coast of France, we calculated that firepower would more than compensate for our lack of concealment...".<sup>35</sup>

Bradley understood that the invasion would test the American troops who would make the landings. He wanted to use the combat tested 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division in the assault on the sector that would later be slated as Omaha.<sup>36</sup> Serving under Bradley and the FUSA was General Leonard T. Gerow, who was to command the V Corps and General Clarence Huebner of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division.

These men, under Bradley, were responsible for the tactical planning of the assault on Omaha. It was up to these two men to make the plans that would send thousands of soldiers either to their doom or to a glorious success. The two generals were deeply influenced by Montgomery and Bradley who both thought that American



bombers would clear the way for the infantry and would shatter enemy resistance. It was under this false promise of the might of the American bombers that the two generals made their plans. They were promised a heavy aerial bombardment unlike any before, and they drew up their strategy accordingly.

General Gerow, Commander of the V Corps, was not overly impressed with Montgomery's plan for the invasion. Gerow did not think that the American bombers would be able to sufficiently eliminate the German defenses. He voiced his opinions to Bradley on numerous occasions, but in the end he was forced, due to his subservient position to Bradley, to tell his subordinates that he expected limited casualties and complete success on Omaha.<sup>37</sup>

Gerow also disagreed with Bradley over the number of troops that he could land during the assault. Gerow wished to land multiple divisions side by side so that in case the air and naval bombardments had failed, there would be sufficient numbers of men ashore. Bradley did not agree with Gerow's plan for landing two divisions, and instead he allowed V Corps to land the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division with one Regimental Combat Team, (RCT), of the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry. Bradley was more concerned with the post-landing campaigns than with the actual assault itself. He felt that the landings would be the easier part of the invasion, and therefore he wanted a quick landing that would facilitate a rapid linkup with the British, who would be landing on the left of Omaha. Gerow disagreed with Bradley's proposal, but he was forced to accept it, regardless of what he thought.<sup>††</sup>

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<sup>††</sup> Bradley was hesitant to trust Gerow's judgment. This was because Gerow had no experience leading in combat. Bradley thought that Gerow had attained the command of the V Corps simply by being a close associate of Supreme Commander Eisenhower.

Bradley did not want there to be any holes in the line of his advancing troops. He knew that the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D.<sup>§§</sup> was battle tested, so there was no chance that it would not be going in on the assault. The 1<sup>st</sup> was to link up with the British on the left, while the 29<sup>th</sup> Division's RCT would make contact with the other American beach, Utah, on the right. The reinforcing division would then be able to land in between the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D. and the 29<sup>th</sup> without any serious bottlenecks.<sup>38</sup>

Aside from disorderly landings due to congested beaches, the Omaha planners feared the existence of obstacles. Bradley knew that Rommel had spent significant time increasing the number of obstacles on the beaches, and therefore he wished to see them eliminated before the infantry came ashore. Rommel himself placed much hope in the performance of his obstacles, and hoped that they would, "not...only...halt the enemy's approach to the beaches...but also to destroy his landing equipment and troops."<sup>39</sup>

The Americans, during the Conference on Landing Assaults in May through June 1943, understood the potential of the German obstacles that they faced. They fully expected wire entanglements, mines sown to destroy landing craft and laid out in minefields, walls that could be used to prevent the movement of vehicles off the beach, anti-tank ditches, steel fences, metal rails and concrete pillars known as "dragon's teeth".<sup>40</sup> Bradley planned on using the aerial bombardment and the naval shelling to eliminate the obstacles that could hinder the infantry's advance. In March 1944, Bradley decided to give the problem of obstacle removal to Gerow, the Corps Commander.<sup>41</sup>

The removal of beach obstacles was a key premise in the success of the assault. If the men and tanks came ashore and became bogged down by obstacles, they could become sitting targets for the Germans. At the same time, if the men were stuck on the

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<sup>§§</sup> I.D. is substituted for Infantry Division

beach and could not get off it, the reinforcing waves would become delayed in the quagmire of sunken landing craft and dead bodies.

It was decided, after much inter-service arguing, that the Navy would be responsible for the obstacles that lay in the high water mark while the Army engineers would destroy the obstacles in the low water mark. The Navy would bear the majority of the responsibilities: it would drench the beach with fire, clear the underwater mines and obstacles and provide the landing craft for the infantry to come ashore on.<sup>42</sup> After the beach had been secured, the Army and Navy would work together to continue clearing the beach. They were to open 16 gaps in the beach that would each be 50 yards wide. These gaps would allow for the landing craft to come ashore without the worry of mines or obstacles that could ground or sink them.<sup>43</sup>

In April 1944, the Army created Provisional Engineer groups to assist in the D-Day landings. These engineer groups would be responsible for the Army's obstacle removal duties during the landings. Their goal was to, "Clear, develop, organize, and operate the assault landing beaches to facilitate the rapid unloading of craft and movement of vehicles and supplies ashore."<sup>44</sup> The tasks of the Naval and Army engineers were vital to the success of the operation. Their job was to clear lanes that would allow the infantry to land in an orderly manner, as Bradley so desired.

Gerow feared that the existence of obstacles would destroy any hope for a successful landing. He wanted the specialized armor to land under the cover of a longer naval and aerial bombardment at the designated H-Hour. Five minutes later, the engineers could land to begin their work. Finally, he desired the infantry to land thirty minutes behind the specialized armor. This gap in time would allow the engineers and

tanks to destroy the German obstacles and emplacements.<sup>45</sup> Gerow petitioned Montgomery and Bradley to push the H-Hour back thirty minutes to allow more time for his plan to work. His plea was denied due to Montgomery's and Bradley's desires to see the aerial bombing executed as accurately as possible. A thirty-minute time difference would not only place the bombers in the dark where they would be less accurate, but it would require the men landing in the wrong tidal conditions.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> As the plan stood, the aerial bombing allowed for a twenty-five minute window of time before H-Hour. During this time, the Navy would shell the beach, and the tide would steadily begin its rise to the high water mark.

It is also important to note that under Bradley's plan, which did not allow much time between the landing of the armor and the engineers, the engineers alone could not fight off the Germans and successfully clear the sixteen desired lanes. This was asking too much of both the armored forces and the engineers. However, it is important to remember that Bradley made his decisions based on the notion that superior Allied airpower would eliminate the German obstacles and defenses to the point that the men coming ashore would do so under much less hostile conditions than if there had been no aerial bombing.

The final plans for the assault on Omaha relied on a rigid timetable. This timetable was made by men who did not seem to realize that battlefield conditions do not always follow the orders of the men who plan the battles. The timetable was fixed, and it did not allow for any of the inevitable "natural" conditions that surround a battle. The

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> It was of vital importance that the men be landed during the low tide, and not earlier. The men were to land during low tide as the tide came back in. This was because Rommel had not yet completed the high tide line of obstacles, so therefore the landing craft could make their way into the beach without the presence of the obstacles that lay ahead at the low water mark.

planners did not take into consideration the fact that the aerial bombardment might fail, or that the naval shelling may be too inaccurate, or even that the waves on the beach might hamper movement.

It was from England, where the Omaha Beach assault was planned, that the timetable for D-Day emerged. It read as follows:<sup>46</sup>

1. H-Hour, which was soon after low tide, was set for 6:30 AM
2. From 5:50 until 6:27, the Allied Naval forces assembled off Omaha would deliver a lethal barrage that would destroy the German obstacles, emplacements, and will to fight.
3. At 6:00, over 400 bombers of all sizes ranging from heavy to light would drop their payloads on the beaches to create holes in the obstacles, and destroy the German defenders.
4. At 6:29, 64 amphibious tanks which had been launched out in the Channel, would land and begin knocking out German defensive positions
5. At 6:30, 32 regular tanks and armored bulldozers would land on the beaches and assist the amphibious tanks in clearing out the obstacles and German defenders.
6. At 6:31, 8 companies of infantry from the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D and the 29<sup>th</sup> I.D. would land in 36 landing craft.
7. Finally, at 6:33, the engineers would land. They would then have twenty-seven minutes to clear and mark the 16 desired lanes in the beach that would allow the following infantry waves to come ashore unmolested by obstacles.

These plans, as mentioned earlier, relied on little interference from nature or from the Germans. It is astounding that Bradley and Montgomery, two men of military merit and notoriety, would allow such rigid plans to dictate the invasion. General Gerow, who remained submissive to Bradley's plans, was never convinced that the assault on Omaha, as planned, would function properly. It is important to remember that it was Gerow who seemed to make the most accurate appraisals of the enemy situation and of the entire situation that awaited him and his V Corps men, for whom he shared a deep need to keep safe.

All of these well-laid plans were simply that; plans. They were not infallible nor were they perfect. The fact of the matter is that the American V Corps would be assaulting a well-prepared and well-defended enemy position. The Germans, under the keen eye of Field Marshal Rommel, had since December 1943 doubled, if not tripled, their efforts to repel the invading forces. Yet, the Atlantic Wall was in no way an impregnable defensive measure. It was constantly being undermined by the German High Command and since 1943, the German Army in France had been steadily weakened by the demand for troops in the East, and all the while, the Allied Air Forces had set about a campaign of destroying the Luftwaffe and the transportation networks in France. As a result, when the men landed on D-Day, they did so under conditions that were not in existence two years prior when the Canadians landed in tragedy on the doorsteps of the Germans at Dieppe. Even though the men landed under significantly improved conditions than in Dieppe, the landings at Omaha were still fraught with disaster and military blunders that had devastating effects on the invasion forces.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 2

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<sup>1</sup> Report No. 292, Army Operational Research Group, "Comparison of British and American Areas in Normandy in terms of Fire Support and its Effects", August 1945. pg. 1 [U.S. Army War College, Carlisle PA]

<sup>2</sup> Morrison. pg. 114

<sup>3</sup> Liddel Hart, B.H., ed. The Rommel Papers. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953. pg. 453

<sup>4</sup> Mitcham, Samuel. Hitler's Field Marshals and Their Battles. New York: Cooper Square Press, 1988. pgs. 186-187.

<sup>5</sup> Mitcham, Samuel. The Desert Fox In Normandy. New York: Cooper Square Press, 1997. pg. 7

<sup>6</sup> War Cabinet Chiefs of Staff Committee: "Operation Overlord Reports and Appreciation". July 30, 1943. pg. 4 [U.S. Army War College, Carlisle PA]

<sup>7</sup> Conference on Landing Assaults, [Document No 90277]. May 24 to June 23, 1943. pg. 1 [U.S. Army War College, Carlisle PA]

<sup>8</sup> Ryan, Cornelius. The Longest Day. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959. pg. 29

<sup>9</sup> Report No. 292, Army Operational Research Group, "Comparison of British and American Areas in Normandy in terms of Fire Support and its Effects". pg. 2

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*. pg. 18

<sup>11</sup> Report C.B. 004385A. Report by The Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. "Expeditionary Force on Operation Neptune", October 1944. pg. 56 [U.S. Army War College, Carlisle PA]

<sup>12</sup> Saunders, Anthony. Hitler's Atlantic Wall. New York: Sutton Publishing, 2001. pg. 150

<sup>13</sup> Al Hine, et al., eds., D-Day The Invasion Of Europe. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1962. pg. 80.

<sup>14</sup> Saunders. pg. 150

<sup>15</sup> Mitcham, The Desert Fox In Normandy. pg. 60

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* pg. 74

<sup>17</sup> Report No. 292, Army Operational Research Group, "Comparison of British and American Areas in Normandy in terms of Fire Support and its Effects". pg. 10

<sup>18</sup> Report C.B. 004385A. Report by The Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. "Expeditionary Force on Operation Neptune". pg. 60

<sup>19</sup> Morrison. pg. 113

<sup>20</sup> Coffey, Michael. Military Blunders. London: Greenhill Books, 1999. pg. 142

<sup>21</sup> Weinberg, Gerhard L. A World At Arms. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994. pg. 360

<sup>22</sup> Keegan, John. Six Armies In Normandy. New York: Penguin Books, 1982. pg. 121

<sup>23</sup> Report #C.C. 04244, Great Britain Combined Operations Command: "Combined Report On The Dieppe Raid". 1942. pg. 38 [U.S. Army War College, Carlisle PA]

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* pg. 44

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* pg. 42

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* pg. 43

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* pg. 43

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* pgs. 45-46

<sup>29</sup> Davis, Kenneth S. Dwight Eisenhower: Soldier of Democracy. New York: Konecky and Konecky, 1945. pg. 454

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, Adrian R. Omaha Beach, A Flawed Victory. Chapel Hill and London: The Univ. of NC Press, 2001. pg. 48

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* pg. 38

<sup>32</sup> War Cabinet Chiefs of Staff Committee: "Operation Overlord Reports and Appreciation". pg. 18

<sup>33</sup> COMINCH P-006. "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force June 1944". October 1944. Ch.1 pg. 2

<sup>34</sup> Lewis. pg. 156

<sup>35</sup> Bradley, Omar. A Soldier's Story. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951. pg. 242

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* pg. 155

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* pg. 154

<sup>38</sup> Bradley. pg. 237

<sup>39</sup> Liddel Hart, B.H. pg. 458

<sup>40</sup> Conference on Landing Assaults, [Document No 90277]. pg. 2

<sup>41</sup> Lewis. pg. 195

<sup>42</sup> Headquarters PROV ENGR SP BRIG GROUP, [Field Order No. 3]. May 11, 1944. pg. 1 [U.S. Army War College, Carlisle PA]

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*. pg. 199

<sup>44</sup> Headquarters PROV ENGR SP BRIG GROUP, [Field Order No. 3]. pg. 2

<sup>45</sup> Lewis. Pg. 203

<sup>46</sup> The following information comes from: Howarth, David. Dawn of D-Day. London: Greenhill Books, 2001. pg. 138



## CHAPTER 3

### BATTLESHIPS AND BOMBERS

As first light approached on the morning of June 6, 1944, the massive allied naval armada steadily made its way toward the shores of Omaha Beach. The men aboard the transports nervously awaited a destiny that none of them could imagine. Some would live, some would not, but all would fight bravely. Onboard the warships: the heavy battlewagons, the cruisers, the destroyers, and the smaller boats that would serve as close support craft, the sailors awaited their own destinies. As they drew closer to the shore, the beach became visible for the first time. Omaha Beach was no longer simply a name, or a model beach laid out on a sand table—it was reality, and it lay before them.

The ships advanced in and began to line up in relation with their target areas. The guns of the fleet would bear a murderous fire that was to obliterate Omaha Beach. The men aboard the warships knew and trusted their boats. They believed that when they were done with the beach, nothing would be left standing. Once the firing stopped, the infantry could wade ashore, knowing that the Navy had done its job.

When it was still four miles off the shore, the Commander of the *U.S.S. Carmick*, a naval destroyer, made an announcement to his crew. Commander Robert O. Beer knew the importance of this operation, and was pleased to be taking a part in it. He pressed the intercom and delivered a message to his crew. It was as follows, “Now hear this! This is probably going to be the biggest party you boys will ever go to—so let’s all get out on the floor and dance!”<sup>1</sup>

The men of the naval armada assembled off Omaha were confident, and they were excited to be taking part in the invasion. They truly believed that they would clear the way for the infantry, and through their actions, secure the safety of the men who were about to wade ashore.

Force “O” as it was called, was the Naval force that assembled off Omaha in the early morning hours of D-Day. It was commanded by American Rear Admiral John Lesslie Hall, who was given the responsibility of leading the Naval force that was to both bombard Omaha Beach and ferry the men and materiel onto the beach. Force “O” consisted of two American battleships, the *Arkansas* and the *Texas*, the British Light cruiser, *Glasgow*<sup>\*</sup>, the French cruisers, *Montcalm* and *Georges Leygues*, and eight American and three British destroyers.<sup>2</sup> Accompanying these larger warships were numerous landing craft that were carrying artillery pieces, as well as ships that were equipped with rockets.

As the naval convoy, which consisted of warships and transports, made its way across the English Channel, many of the ships became confused in the darkness and lost their way. This led to delays in ships arriving at their designated positions, and caused significant confusion. The majority of the warships whose fire support was so vital to the invasion made it to their designated sectors ahead of the landing craft, and therefore ahead of the delays.

The beach was broken down into two sections: the eastern and western sectors. Each sector had been allocated to ships that would then fire from their appropriate section. At around 2:20 in the morning, the warships arrived and began to divide the beach.<sup>3</sup> The western task force was led by the *H.M.S. Glasgow* and was followed by the

*U.S.S. Texas*. The eastern task force was led by the *U.S.S. Arkansas*<sup>†</sup> and the French light cruisers *Montcalm* and *Georges Leygues*. The numerous destroyers established themselves in a firing line that stretched across the beach from east to west. Many of these destroyers would later serve one of the most important and memorable roles in the invasion.

The firepower assembled off Omaha was formidable, yet it was nowhere near the intensity that would have been mobilized by the Americans in the Pacific. Even though there were only two battleships in the waters off Omaha, that figure had been increased since the initial plans were made. Initially there were to be only two American battleships available for the two American beaches. This would not have been enough firepower, and General Bradley himself said that, “I would gladly have swapped a dozen B-17’s for each 12-inch gun I could wrangle.”<sup>4</sup>

The goal of the naval bombardment was to eliminate enemy guns that could threaten the fleet and to clear the beach of obstacles. The D-Day planners did not want to risk losing their ships to the well dug in German guns, so they made these guns the priority for the battleships. Even if the enemy guns could not be destroyed, it was hoped by the drafters of the Joint Fire Plan that the guns could at least be silenced temporarily.<sup>5</sup> The naval planners understood that counterbattery fire would not necessarily destroy the enemy guns, but their hope was to bombard the installations into submission.<sup>6</sup>

The actual Naval Bombardment Plan that was to be used on D-Day was as follows:

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\* The average British Cruiser packed the same firepower as an American destroyer.

† The *U.S.S. Arkansas* was the oldest warship in the United States Navy at this time.

1. Counterbattery fire, which was to begin at first light. This was the bombardment that would be used to silence the enemy guns that could threaten the fleet.
2. The attack on the beach defenses at H-20 minutes. This task would be undertaken by the destroyers and close support craft armed with artillery pieces, and when their counterbattery fire was complete, the cruisers and battleships were to join in.
3. The final phase was that of close support fire when it was called in from men on the beach.<sup>7</sup>

The fear that the German batteries along the Normandy coast would sink or damage the Allied naval flotilla was real in the minds of the D-Day planners. As a result, it is easy to see that the main focus of the plans for the naval bombardment hinged on this factor. Yes, there were two battleships off Omaha on D-Day, but their primary job was not to use their heavy guns against the dug in German defenders or obstacle belts, but rather to eliminate the threat posed by the coastal guns.

Throughout the entire forty minute naval bombardment that had been seen as such a reassurance to the waiting infantrymen, only twenty minutes of it was to be spent on the beach defenses and obstacles. Twenty minutes seems hardly enough time to eliminate the majority of the enemy machineguns and mines, but that was all the time that was given. One of the main targets identified at the Conference On Landing Assaults for the pre-invasion naval bombardment, was the minefields or wire that could slow the infantry.<sup>8</sup> It is hard to imagine that this short duration was all the time that was available

to complete this task, but one must remember that the destruction of the beaches would mainly come at the hands of the mighty American bombers.

Another key factor not to be forgotten was that the beach drenching fire was, for all intents and purposes, left to the smaller caliber guns of the destroyers and close support craft. Only when they were done shooting at the German coastal guns would the battleships and cruisers join in. This author is sure that when the infantrymen had been told that the American battleships would be there firing on D-Day, they envisioned them firing at the German defenses, and not at the coastal guns.

The actual tasks assigned to the naval vessels varied. The *U.S.S. Texas* was given the task of destroying the guns at the infamous Pointe du Hoc.<sup>†</sup> The *Arkansas*, *Glasgow*, *Georges Leygues*, and the destroyers were to fire on and behind the flanks of the beach. The French cruiser *Montcalm* was to fire on the area known as Port en Bessin.<sup>9</sup>

A year prior to the D-Day assault, at the Conference on Landing Assaults, recommendations were made concerning the role that naval forces would play during a landing assault. According to the Conference, as long as there was sufficient ammunition, counterbattery fire should follow naval fire on enemy installations that could be in place to oppose the initial troop landings.<sup>10</sup> While it was logical to destroy or silence any enemy guns that could threaten the invasion fleet, it was of utmost importance for the warships to destroy the enemy positions that could hamper the movement of the initial assaults. If the men could not get ashore safely, the fleet would have had to spend significantly more time close to shore assisting them. In that time, the enemy guns could have wreaked havoc on the fleet. If the enemy positions on the beach

had been immediately knocked out, the warships could have then switched their fire to the batteries protecting the coast.

Aside from the fire that was to be provided by the larger capital ships, there were smaller close support ships off Omaha on D-Day. These smaller craft were to proceed towards the shore much closer than the larger ships could. These craft were created as a result of the failure at Dieppe. At Dieppe, there were no naval vessels that could come close to shore and provide close fire support for the infantry. At Omaha, the planners hoped to utilize these shallow draft ships to a great effect against the enemy.

Since the battleships and cruisers were given the task of counterbattery fire for the majority of the pre-invasion bombardment, it was these smaller ships and the destroyers that would be firing on the beaches and obstacles. One of the new ships was the LCT(R).<sup>§</sup> These landing craft equipped with rockets were to serve a vital role in the obstacle clearance plan. Each ship carried 1064 rockets, and there were nine LCT(R)s at Omaha on D-Day. The rockets were fired electronically, but they were aimed along with the entire ship—the direction that the ship pointed in, the rockets went.<sup>11</sup> If the seas were pitching, or the ship was suddenly spun in the wrong direction, the rockets would not land in the target area. The rockets had a 3500-yard range, and could knock out enemy obstacles, mines and wire. On paper this seemed like a sound plan; a plan that could eliminate the need to have battleships or cruisers fire on the beaches themselves for too long.

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<sup>‡</sup> A special task force of U.S. Army Rangers was given the job of scaling the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc on D-Day. After suffering heavy casualties, the Rangers discovered that the German guns that had been thought to have been there, were merely logs jutting out of concrete casemates.

<sup>§</sup> LCT(R) was simply the name given to Landing Craft Tanks with rocket firing abilities.

The rocket firing ships were to launch their payloads when the infantry was 300 yards from the shore. The destruction that they caused was to clear lanes for the landing craft, and to enable the men to wade ashore under safer conditions. Before the operation, it was thought that the LCT(R)s would have two and one half times the salvo power of one battleship.<sup>12</sup> While on paper this may have seemed so, in reality, it took hours to reload one rocket firing ship, while a battleship could fire another salvo in a matter of minutes.

Another shallow draft ship was the LCG(L).<sup>\*\*</sup> These ships carried two small naval guns and other small weapons. Their job was to linger on the flanks of the fleet where they would provide the close fire support that was deemed necessary. They were to fire on enemy emplacements and provide fire support that was called in from the beaches. Interestingly enough, it was thought that they could be beached to provide stable firing positions. This would have required the beach to be clear of enemy guns, and would have made the small caliber guns of the LCGs somewhat ineffective for long distance bombardments against targets situated inland.

There were other shallow draft ships on D-Day. Some carried anti-aircraft guns while others carried Army artillery or tanks. The ships carrying tanks ashore would use the tanks to fire as they were brought in to land. Therefore, even a simple landing craft would become a support ship. The main benefit of these smaller craft was that they had the ability to follow the landing craft that bore infantry to shore. From close range, they could fire on targets of opportunity and assist the infantry as if they were regular artillery pieces.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>\*\*</sup> LCG(L) was the name given to a Landing Craft Gun Large.

These and all other shallow draft ships would provide close support and indirect fire support at Omaha. They, plus the larger warships, should have been able to force the German defenders to keep their heads down long enough for the infantry to land safely.

Even with all of this naval fire, the plans for Omaha hinged on one other major factor, the aerial bombardment. From the outset, this was seen as vital to the success of the invasion. Like the naval forces, the air forces had specific plans for the invasion.

In the summer of 1940 through 1942, the German Luftwaffe was a formidable force in Europe. The German fighters controlled the skies over France and Germany and wreaked havoc on the American daylight bombers that arrived in force in 1942. But, since then, the American Eighth and Ninth Air Forces had systematically dismantled the Luftwaffe's fighting capabilities. The Luftwaffe, in 1944, was not even a shadow of what it had been during its heyday. Once the Luftwaffe had been broken, the Allied began a new phase of the Air War. They began to systematically isolate Normandy from the rest of the surrounding French countryside. Railroads, bridges, marshalling yards, radar sites and roadways had been bombed repeatedly leaving few roads available for travel. The few available roads would later be heavily monitored by Allied fighter planes that would swoop down upon unsuspecting German troops or vehicles.<sup>14</sup> Normandy had been completely isolated by June 1944, and the Luftwaffe had been powerless to stop it.<sup>15</sup>

The American air forces in Europe were quite confident in their abilities. Their leaders were sure that airpower alone could bring Germany to its knees. While this was not true, the effective performance of the daylight bombers in isolating Normandy had given them much reason for confidence. General Montgomery, the overall commander of the Normandy invasion, whose plans relied heavily on the daylight bombers, felt that



the Army and Air Force were, “independent”, but had a “common task”.<sup>16</sup> Montgomery believed very much in air and ground units being run separately, yet working together on the battlefield. This is why he relied on bombers on D-Day. He felt that the infantry and bombers could work well together as long as the Air Force understood that it needed to be proficient in both close air support and its normal bombing duties.

The Eighth and Ninth Air Forces were not prepared for their role as a strictly close support group on D-Day. They had spent the past few years working hard in daylight bombing raids on German industrial and transportation targets. Their performances had earned them adulation and fostered self-confidence, and as a result, the Air Forces did not feel that they should be forced to act according to the wishes of ground commanders.<sup>17</sup> Since they resented the notion of being subservient to the ground commanders, less time was spent training high level and medium bomber crews with the task of close air support.

Although they preferred not to act alongside the Army, the Air Force commanders understood that they had a role to play on D-Day. As a result, they trained air support parties who carried VHF radios ashore with them. There would be one air support party with each RCT that came ashore. These men could call in air strikes on targets, but were not permitted to talk to the planes circling overhead. They had to contact a control craft in the water that would then pass the message along.<sup>18</sup> This plan was somewhat unsound and it resulted in many missed targets.

The role of close support aircraft had become important since the lessons learned at Dieppe. After Dieppe, it was realized that close air support from fighters was necessary, but could not be used as the only air support in an invasion.<sup>19</sup> The fighters

could not, with their machineguns or cannon, keep enemy positions quiet; nor could they eliminate the beach obstacles. The pilots who flew over the battlefield could bomb or strafe targets of opportunity, but there was a need for heavy bombers to destroy the majority of the beach defenses.

Prior to D-Day, it was seen that bombers and fighters could be utilized to destroy or silence enemy coastal batteries. Though the bombers may not have been completely accurate, they could use their high explosive bombs to stun and destroy concrete emplacements, while at the same time providing smoke that would hinder the firing of the guns.<sup>20</sup> This would eliminate the need to use naval vessels to spend precious time firing on concrete blockhouses that supposedly held guns that could threaten the fleet. It was also realized that the bombers could not destroy all concrete emplacements that were on the beaches. Again, the hope was that the high explosive bombs would stun or shock the positions into silence. It is surprising that even though the D-Day planners understood the limitations of the Air Force, the plans for Omaha relied heavily on the aerial bombardment. Even Air Marshall Tedder, the Air Commander-In-Chief, did not have full faith in the abilities of the airmen to bomb accurately enough to eliminate the beach defenses.<sup>21</sup>

The plan called for 480 American heavy daylight bombers, the only “precision” bombers in the Allied arsenal, to drop their bombs starting at 200 yards off shore. From there, the waves of bombers would continue dropping bombs further and further inland, hopefully saturating the beach with high explosive bombs. The planes would drop 1285 tons of bombs on the beaches and 13 target areas.<sup>22</sup> This was a plan that relied on

accuracy. In good daylight, the bombers probably could bomb relatively on target<sup>††</sup>, but in adverse conditions, when they had to rely on bombing by radar, their accuracy was greatly diminished.<sup>23</sup>

Even though it was known that the bombers might not be able to destroy all of the enemy obstacles and gun positions, the awaiting infantrymen were promised that the bombardment would eliminate the enemy. The American bombers, the B-17's, and the B-24's, were well known, and their bomb capacities were well respected by the airmen and infantrymen. With these airplanes bombing on their side, the infantry had much less to worry about than had the bombers not been there at all.

The bombers, even if they did not destroy all of the enemy guns, would provide another vital role in the assault. They would crater the beach with holes for the men to seek cover in.<sup>24</sup> The infantry had high expectations in the use of the bombers; the bombers would either destroy the German guns, force the defenders to keep their heads down, or the bombers would crater the beaches with holes useful for cover or concealment.

Both the aerial and naval plans were quite thorough, according to the majority of the strategists in the planning portion of the assault. It was a matter of seeing how the plans would stand up to the test of battlefield conditions which were often confused by the weather and by the smoke that lingered above and around a battle. On D-Day itself, the Allied planners who had spent such time and effort in attempting to provide the infantry with as easy a time spent on the beach, would be shocked to see that their well-laid plans had gone terribly awry.

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<sup>††</sup> See also Bradley's plan called Operation Cobra, for the breakout of Normandy.

The first major problem that emerged on D-Day was one over which not even General Eisenhower or General Bradley had any control; it was not a problem that the men who were sailing aboard the multitude of warships, or flying high above in their heavy bombers could control. The problem was the weather.

The morning of June 6, 1944 was not a pleasant one. There was a westward wind that reached upwards of 15 knots off Omaha. This wind stirred the sea and created waves that reached three to four feet in height. There was cloud cover in some areas as low as 1000 feet, and in other areas as high as 10000 feet.<sup>25</sup>

The rough seas caused significant discomfort amongst the infantrymen who began to assemble on the landing craft. The Allied ships that gathered off Omaha did so ten to eleven miles offshore where they would hopefully be out of the range of the dreaded guns of Pointe-du-Hoc.<sup>††</sup> They were far out of the range of the German guns, yet they were out far enough to cause a long, choppy ride ashore for the infantry. The men of the 1st I.D. and the 29<sup>th</sup> I.D. were aboard a multitude of Allied transports: the *HMS Empire Anvil*, the *HMS Empire Javelin*, the *USS Charles Carroll*, the *USS Henrico*, the *USS Samuel Chase*, and the *USS Thomas Jefferson*.<sup>26</sup> Onboard the *USS Ancon* were Generals Gerow and Huebner, who were anxiously awaiting the fates of their men. General Bradley and his staff waited aboard the *USS Augusta* for the invasion to begin.

The invasion that had been so well planned and so meticulously detailed and argued over was now out of the hands of any of these commanders. The fate of the infantrymen was in their own hands when they scrambled down the cargo nets and boarded their landing craft. The plans had been given to the officers, and the men were

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<sup>††</sup> The battery of Pointe-du-Hoc caused so much fear in the minds of the planners that it was considered to be the most dangerous battery in France.

well trained. All Bradley, Gerow and Huebner could do was pray and hope that everything went according to plan.

Between two and three o'clock in the morning, the transports assembled offshore in two parallel lines, and immediately began unloading the men into the landing craft. These men would spend the next two and one half to three hours aboard small, cramped and bobbing landing craft. They were ready to assault Omaha Beach, and they were confident that the Navy and Air Force would do their part to ensure the safety of the men in the boats.

As the landing craft carrying the men and material waited their turn to make the run in to shore, they circled. Outside of the formation of transports, the landing craft circled until 4:30, at which time they received the order to straighten out and go in.<sup>27</sup> The landing craft straightened out into five columns and began to make their way towards an unforeseen and uncertain future.

At 3:55 in the morning, General Bradley recalled being awakened by the sound of the bells aboard the *USS Augusta*, a LST equipped with eight-inch guns.<sup>28</sup> The crewmen scrambled to their battle stations and began to prepare for the coming action. The naval bombardment would begin at 5:50, so the men had to be prepared in time to commence firing on schedule.

This was not an uncommon scene. Aboard all of the warships: the cruisers, the destroyers and the close support craft, the crews began to prepare for their duties. The larger warships slowly made their way toward their intended firing lines as close as 5000 yards off shore. It must have been an impressive sight to see this many warships,

transports and landing craft coming toward the shore, yet not all had gone according to plan.

The passage across the Channel had gone without interference from the German Navy, or what remained of the German Navy. Yet, in the darkness, some transports had gotten lost. The blackout conditions that the fleet was forced to operate under caused confusion, and by first light not every ship was where it was supposed to be. Only the warships that were slated to fire on Omaha made it in ahead of the confusion, and in the right places. The fact that any ships made it to the correct locations at all is amazing. Aside from the multitude of warships, there were transports, LCIs, LSTs towing the portable concrete ferries that would later allow for a rapid deployment of follow up forces in the days to come, and there were LCTs.<sup>§§</sup> These ships all followed the warships, which were in turn following the minesweepers, whose job it was to secure a safe passage. It was a huge armada, yet it only represented one of the five invasion beaches.

Even with the confusion of the nighttime crossing, the warships and transports assembled off Omaha. At around 5:15, first light appeared, and the fleet which had made its way undetected towards the enemy was finally visible. The men of the German 352<sup>nd</sup>, as well as the 716<sup>th</sup>, stared in disbelief at the array of ships that was presented before them. No one could believe that the Allies had this many ships. When Major Werner Pluskat of the 352<sup>nd</sup> called his headquarters to alert them to the invasion fleet, he was told that, “Nobody has that many ships!”<sup>29</sup> Even though they were in shock, the Germans defending Omaha rallied and began moving into their concrete bunkers and gun positions. There may have been a huge invasion force coming towards them, but they were going to fight to halt it on the beach.

If you were aboard one of the invasion ships, and you were looking at Omaha Beach, you would see the area known as Port-en-Bessin on your far left, and on the far right, you would see the towering cliffs of Pointe-du-Hoc. These were the boundaries of the Beach, and with these points, as markers of “left” and “right”, the description of the Beach shall come in this thesis.

At 5:30, the first German fire against the fleet came from Port-en-Bessin. The small battery there opened fire on the *USS Arkansas*. The battery commenced firing almost as soon as the *Arkansas* became visible in the early morning light. A few minutes later, the destroyers on the same section of the beach came under fire. As the light improved, spotter aircraft swarmed overhead, calling out the positions of the batteries that fired on the ships. These spotter aircraft served a vital role in notifying warships of targets that soon became obscured by smoke on the beaches.<sup>30</sup> With the help of the spotter aircraft, the batteries at Port-en-Bessin were silenced by 5:52.

At 5:50, the official starting time for the bombardment, the ships opened fire. The *USS Texas* fired on the cliffs of Pointe-du-Hoc, and the *Montcalm* continued to fire on Port-en-Bessin.<sup>31</sup> The *Texas* and the *Arkansas* fired their combined 10 14-inch guns, 12 12-inch guns, and 12 5-inch guns throughout the bombardment.<sup>32</sup> Onboard the *USS Augusta*, Bradley and his staff stuffed cotton in their ears and anxiously awaited the effects of the bombardment.<sup>33</sup> It was a tense time for the commanders; they could not help their men in any way, and they could not alter the plans once they were set in motion.

The ships of the fleet were to fire continuously on their targets according to the fire plan. There was to be fire on the beaches until the first landing craft touched down.

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<sup>88</sup> LCI—Landing Craft Infantry, LST—Landing Ship Tank, LCT—Landing Craft Tank

Destroyers closed in on the beaches and fired round after round at machinegun emplacements and other defenses, while the LCGs and other small craft closed in even further and punished the concrete emplacements.

The larger ships, the battleships and cruisers, continued their counterbattery fire until ten after six. The *Arkansas* traded shots with the battery at Port-en-Bessin until ten of six when the *Glasgow* took her place.<sup>34</sup> The *Arkansas* then switched her fire to the beach exit leading toward Les Moulins. Here, there was supposed to be a formidable strongpoint, and the *Arkansas* destroyed a few German positions.

The *Texas* on the western, or right side, of the beach fired on Pointe-du-Hoc, pitting the ground in front of the eerily silent batteries. Here, men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rangers were to climb the bluffs and silence the dreaded guns once and for all. After enough time had been spent on Pointe-du-Hoc, the *Texas* turned her attention to the beach exit leading to Vierville-sur-Mer. Here, the *Texas* was aided in her bombardment by a destroyer and a LCG who both fired upon pillboxes and other guns. Interestingly enough, it is at this exit that the infantry faced the most murderous fire of D-Day.

The larger warships spent the majority of the time firing on suspected strong points that lay behind the beaches, leaving the bombardments of the machineguns and pillboxes to the destroyers and LCGs with their smaller caliber guns. These small caliber guns, along with the heavy guns of the battleships and cruisers, fired round after round at the concrete emplacements. In fact, there was more destroyer fire on Omaha than was used on the British beaches.<sup>35</sup>

To the casual observer, it would seem impossible for any of the pillboxes and reinforced concrete emplacements to remain standing after such a murderous barrage, but



the fact of the matter is that they did. There are reports of large naval shells bouncing off the concrete emplacements that were three feet thick in some places. How could anyone expect a forty-minute naval barrage to eradicate such defenses?

The German guns, most of which did not fire out to sea, remained largely silent throughout the bombardment. A few fired back, but not one Allied naval vessel taking place in the bombardment was hit.<sup>36</sup> As a result of their silence, the majority of the German guns were not noticed, and therefore not fired on until they would later cause such terror on the slowly approaching landing craft.<sup>37</sup>

In the final minutes of the bombardment, the shellfire reached its peak. It was around this time that the LCT(R)s opened fire with thousands of rockets.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> The heavy seas and tossing waves greatly hindered the effectiveness of the rockets. Since the ships themselves were the aiming and firing platforms for the rockets, the heavy seas caused the firing to go far off target. Men onboard landing craft heard the roar of rockets being fired and considered themselves lucky for being provided with such fire support. In fact there are reports of the rockets landing over the cliffs, in the water before the sand, and even amongst the men who were sailing ashore.<sup>38</sup> The rockets had been fired too early out of fear of hitting the advancing infantry, and few if any had destroyed any of the wire entanglements or obstacles.<sup>39</sup>

Although the rocket fire was inaccurate, the men's morale were boosted by it; that is, until they saw its effects.<sup>40</sup> The rocket fire created a huge cloud of dust that, along with the smoke and dust from the naval and aerial bombardments, made visibility and proper target definition next to impossible.<sup>41</sup> The naval warships did not cease firing on

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> The actual time the rockets were fired is somewhat unclear. It is even possible that they were fired at around 6:15. This would have given the Germans plenty of time to prepare themselves.

the Germans when H-Hour approached. In fact, they fired more shells at targets of opportunity once the men were ashore helping to direct fire. It is important to discuss the role of the aerial bombardment before continuing on with the naval action at Omaha.

The weather on D-Day hindered the bombing of Omaha Beach to such a great degree that it is even questionable to discuss its role in helping the infantry. On the night before the invasion, Billy Mitchell, the Commander of the Eighth Air Force decided that the weather conditions would not enable his bomber crews to bomb effectively using their optical bombsights.<sup>42</sup> As a result, they were told to bomb via radar, and due to the inaccuracy of bombing by instrument, to delay the deployment a moment or two to prevent mis-dropping on the landing craft.<sup>43</sup> The bomber crews were told to delay the drop up to thirty seconds from when their radars told them to drop. The simple fact is that a plane traveling a few hundred miles per hour told to delay dropping its bombs thirty seconds after it has reached the target will not drop its bombs near the target area.

As the men in the landing craft slowly made their way toward the shore, they could hear the thunderous roar of the warships firing round after devastating round at the Germans. They could see and hear the rockets as they fired hell-bent on destruction. Over all of this noise and confusion there was a sound like no other. It was the sound of the air armada approaching. There were high-level bombers and fighters of all kind. The roar of their engines must have been deafening, yet also welcoming, for these planes were about to destroy anything left standing on the beaches: the obstacles, the mines and the German defenders.

The high-level bombers made their way toward Omaha, and due to the cloud cover and the smoke that obscured the beach, dropped their bombs by instruments with a

delay to avoid hitting the fleet or the men below. As a result, the planned bomb run that was supposed to start at 200 yards off shore and proceed inland, failed. The delayed drop resulted in no bombs hitting the beaches. There are reports of bombs landing upwards of three miles inshore.<sup>44</sup> All of the bombs landed in the fields behind the beaches<sup>45</sup>, and the only casualties from the aerial bombardment that General Montgomery had relied so heavily on were a few cows. Since the initial bombers dropped their payloads a few seconds behind the initial planned target area, their bombs fell further inland than desired. As a result, the following waves continued to drop further and further inland, all the while relying on their instruments and the fact that the previous planes had dropped off the mark.

The bombers had not destroyed or silenced the German guns, nor had they cratered the beach. The men would land with few existing “hiding places”, and were forced to lie out in the open or use craters that were the result of German artillery fire. The bombs had failed to destroy any of the obstacles or emplacements; all that they had managed to do was create more noise and smoke that led to confusion and inaccurate gunfire from the warships patrolling offshore. According to one report, “the bombers [on Omaha], failed to function at all.”<sup>46</sup> A report based on the effects of fire support on the British beaches stated that the aerial bombing knocked out 13% of the weapons destroyed throughout the entire naval and aerial bombardment, and that the bombing caused the majority of the defenders to keep hidden after they had been bombed.<sup>47</sup> This is quite a different account of the use of bombers, yet it displays exactly how helpful the aerial bombing could have been on Omaha.

Major Werner Pluskat of the German 352<sup>nd</sup> huddled in his bunker on Omaha throughout the naval and aerial bombardments. When the bombing had stopped and H-Hour was upon him and his men; he looked around in amazement and saw that not one of his men, and not one of his guns, had been damaged by all of the fire that had been thrown at them.<sup>48</sup> After the German gunners shook off the dust that had fallen on them, and had counted their numbers and good fortunes, they moved forward into position. They all knew the drill; they would not fire until the boats were upon the beaches. They would not expose their batteries to the warships; they would simply wait until the infantry made their way across the pre-sighted and well-defended beach.

The pre-invasion bombardment ended at H-Hour; 6:30 in the morning. There was no real headway made throughout the entire bombardment. The warships had shelled the German guns, while the bombers dropped tons of bombs on unsuspecting cows. The battleships had spent too much time in dealing with counterbattery fire. This was not the fault of the individual commanders, but in the planning. Yet, at the same time, the planners believed that the guns of Pointe-du-Hoc were present, and were not absent as they really were. Had the guns been in place, they may well have devastated the invasion fleet, but they were not there, and their lack of fire should have given this fact away. The heavy naval shelling and the rocket attacks did manage to have one tangible effect on the beach; they completely shrouded it in smoke that prevented the attackers from seeing where they were shooting, or where they were landing.

The bombardment had not been with too few ships, for any more ships would have congested the already clogged waters off Omaha. The plain truth is that the bombardment was too short. Forty minutes was not enough time to eradicate reinforced

concrete bunkers and belt upon belt of obstacles. In hindsight, it is easy to point this out, but to the men who planned the timing of the assault, the timing seemed sound. It is hard to imagine that even though the plans called for a landing after low tide, the planners did not consider the length of the bombardment to be too short.

One of the reasons for the failures of the bombardment was the ammunition used by the warships. It was recommended in an after action report by the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Bertram H. Ramsey, that high explosive shells should be used more widely in future operations.<sup>49</sup> It was realized that, “little or no material damage was done to casemated guns by cruiser fire...” This fact reflects the strength in design and construction of the German defenses. It was known long before D-Day that the defenses were sometimes three to six feet thick, and made of reinforced concrete.<sup>50</sup> Since the construction of the casemates was well understood, the naval warships should have been given more time to bombard them.

High explosive shells not only have a devastating effect on the object that they hit, but they have a demoralizing effect on the men inside of a target. A recommendation made after the battle suggests that oil bombs or rockets should be used to force the men out of the emplacements so that the high explosive rounds could do the most damage on them.<sup>51</sup> Even with high explosive shells, it is doubtful though that the forty-minute barrage would have destroyed the enemy guns.

After the pre-invasion bombardment, the naval forces continued to fire at targets of opportunity that were presented by the infantry that were receiving a mauling at the hands of the unscathed German defenders. The destroyers and LCGs closed in as close to the beaches as possible to support the troops that were pinned down by the murderous

fire. At around 8:00, 90 minutes into the invasion, destroyers began to close in on the beaches to assist the men. The men aboard the destroyers could see the infantrymen being blown apart by German guns and raked by machinegun fire. The destroyers raced in to the shore to fire on targets of opportunity. Some boats actually scraped their hulls on the bottom, but managed to get off.<sup>52</sup>

From such close proximity to the beach, some ships made it to 800 yards off the shore. They could provide close fire support to the men on the beaches, and from there they dueled with German anti-tank and machineguns. One destroyer, the *USS Frankford*, closed to within 400 yards of the beach, using visual clues to avoid running aground.<sup>53</sup>

The destroyers were able to provide the fire support for the men that the tanks and artillery that never made it ashore could not. Gunners would wait until spotters observed puffs of smoke indicating a mortar or a machinegun, and then they would fire round after round at the target. Some destroyers fired hundreds of rounds while acting as close support craft. After the battle, it was the destroyers that received the major accolades for their work on D-Day.<sup>54</sup>

The battleships and cruisers also continued firing throughout the morning. Their long-range guns fired not only on the beaches, but also at targets far inland that had been spotted by aircraft. They destroyed roadways that were being used as transportation hubs for German reinforcements, and they shot German artillery pieces that were inland, but were firing on the beaches.

LCGs, the new shallow draft vessels, functioned well off Omaha. They were able to provide close fire support to the men who needed it. Though they needed

improvements such as more armor, and speed, they were seen as a vital asset, and a welcome change to the tactics used at Dieppe.

The obstacles surrounding the beach wreaked havoc on the landing craft. The landing craft came ashore with few lanes cleared by the engineers, and as a result, they became snagged on the metal obstacles, were sunk by mines or became bunched up with the traffic and were picked off by German guns. After Dieppe, it was said that the landing craft should not linger too long near the beaches. Had the obstacles been cleared by the rockets and aerial bombardment, this may have been the case, but the truth is that too many landing craft were sunk at the hands of German gunners who simply waited for them to become tangled in the obstacles.

The naval and aerial performances on D-Day varied. The aerial bombardment was a complete failure, but the spotter aircraft were a success. The pre-invasion naval bombardment was too short for the amount of work that needed to be done, but the fire support during the landings was quite helpful to the infantry. The lessons learned at Dieppe were implemented, and a few of them worked. There were larger warships in place, and there were shallow draft vessels that were able to close in on the shore. Still, like at Dieppe, the obstacles had not been cleared and the landing craft and men became jammed in small areas where the Germans systematically wiped them out.

To say that the performance of the Allied naval forces off Omaha was a complete failure is untrue. The sailors did their best in the time that they had, and continued to fire their guns as long as they were needed. The fact of the matter is that the pre-invasion bombardment was too short to accomplish its goals. It was foolish of Montgomery to think that the warships would not need a long time because the bombers would destroy

the beaches. The American bombers were indeed the most precise bombers of the war, but they were still inaccurate, and the fact that they had to drop their bombs via instruments simply compounded the existing accuracy problems.

It was not only Montgomery who believed in the bombers. On D-Day, General Bradley's assistant, Major Chester Hansen, who was aboard the *Ancon* with Bradley saw that there was not as heavy or effective naval fire as he would have expected. To explain this he wrote in his diary, "There is not as much Naval fire support, possibly because of our great air superiority and the bombardment by air of the enemy artillery positions."<sup>55</sup> The planners and leaders, as well as the infantrymen, believed in Montgomery's reliance on airpower to smash his way ashore. Unfortunately, the results of the bombing were not quite what Montgomery expected.

All of the sailors and airmen who fought at Omaha did their best to assist the infantry. Their help was well appreciated by the soldiers who received last minute morale boosters from seeing the big guns of the fleet firing on Omaha, or who saw the vast air armada closing in on the shores. What damage the pre-invasion bombardment actually did is hard to say, but it did help give the men, who were riding ashore in unseaworthy landing craft, the peace of mind that they needed to face a formidable enemy.



### NOTES ON CHAPTER 3

- <sup>1</sup> Ryan. pg. 185
- <sup>2</sup> COMINCH P-006. "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force; June 1944", October 1944. Ch. 2, pg. 1
- <sup>3</sup> Morrison. pg. 118
- <sup>4</sup> Bradley. pg. 254
- <sup>5</sup> Lewis. pg. 212
- <sup>6</sup> Report C.B.004385A. Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. pg. 65
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 213
- <sup>8</sup> Conference on Landing Assaults, [Document No. 90277]. pg. 18
- <sup>9</sup> COMINCH P-006. "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force. Ch. 2, pg. 5
- <sup>10</sup> Conference on Landing Assaults, [Document No. 90277]. pg. 9
- <sup>11</sup> Lewis. pg. 219
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 219
- <sup>13</sup> Conference on Landing Assaults, [Document No. 90277]. pg. 10
- <sup>14</sup> Perret, Geoffrey. Winged Victory. New York: Random House, 1993. pg. 297
- <sup>15</sup> Mitcham. Pg. 42
- <sup>16</sup> Lewis. pg. 235
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 238
- <sup>18</sup> COMINCH P-006. "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force. Ch. 3, pg. 2
- <sup>19</sup> Report #C.C. 04244, Great Britain Combined Operations Command: "Combined Report On The Dieppe Raid". pg. 42
- <sup>20</sup> Conference on Landing Assaults, [Document No. 90277]. pg. 6
- <sup>21</sup> Lewis. pg. 201
- <sup>22</sup> Morrison. Pg. 124
- <sup>23</sup> Howarth. Pg. 139
- <sup>24</sup> Conference on Landing Assaults, [Document No. 90277]. pg. 10
- <sup>25</sup> Report C.B.004385A. Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. pg. 57
- <sup>26</sup> Lewis. pg. 10
- <sup>27</sup> Morrison. Pg. 120
- <sup>28</sup> Bradley. pg. 267
- <sup>29</sup> Ryan. pg. 174
- <sup>30</sup> Report C.B.004385A. Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. pg. 66
- <sup>31</sup> COMINCH P-006. "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force. Ch. 2, pg. 5
- <sup>32</sup> Holderfield, Randy, and Michael J. Varhola. D-Day: The Invasion Of Normandy. Conshohocken PA: Savas Publishing, 2000. pg. 138
- <sup>33</sup> Major Chester Hansen. Diary entry for June 6, 1944. pg. 4
- <sup>34</sup> Morrison. pg. 122
- <sup>35</sup> Report No. 292, Army Operational Research Group, "Comparison of British and American Areas in terms of Fire Support and its Effects". pg. 3
- <sup>36</sup> Provisional Engineer Special Brigade Group, [Operation Report Neptune-26 February to 26 June, 1944]. 30 September 1944. pg. 82
- <sup>37</sup> Tute, Warren, and John Costello, and Terry Hughes. D-Day. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1974. pg. 189.
- <sup>38</sup> Report No. 292, Army Operational Research Group, "Comparison of British and American Areas in terms of Fire Support and its Effects". pg. 5 These reports are taken with "reserve" in the report, but they do hint at the inaccuracy of the rockets.
- <sup>39</sup> Lewis. pg. 16
- <sup>40</sup> Tute, Costello and Hughes. pg. 190
- <sup>41</sup> Al Hine et al. eds. pg. 112

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<sup>42</sup> Mitcham. Pg. 72

<sup>43</sup> Howarth. Pg. 186

<sup>44</sup> Mitcham. Pg. 72

<sup>45</sup> Provisional Engineer Special Brigade Group, [Operation Report Neptune-26 February to 26 June, 1944]. pg. 82

<sup>46</sup> Report C.B.004385A. Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. pg. 68

<sup>47</sup> Army Operational Research Group: Report No. 261. [Casualties and Effects of Fire Support on the British Beaches in Normandy]. April 21, 1945. pg. 5

<sup>48</sup> Ryan. Pg. 188

<sup>49</sup> Report C.B.004385A. Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. pg. 64

<sup>50</sup> Conference on Landing Assaults, [Document No. 90277]. pg. 2

<sup>51</sup> Report C.B.004385A. Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. pg. 68

<sup>52</sup> Morrison. Pg. 143

<sup>53</sup> Holderfield and Varhola. Pg. 142

<sup>54</sup> Report C.B.004385A. Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. pg. 60

<sup>55</sup> Major Chester Hansen. Diary entry for June 6, 1944. pg. 4

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **SWIMMING TANKS AND ENGINEERS**

The sixteen tanks of C Company, of the 741<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Group lay off the shore of Omaha Beach on the morning of June 6, 1944. It was their mission to be launched into the sea 6000 yards off the beach. They were to swim in ten minutes prior to the landing of the infantry and were to begin knocking out enemy positions so that the invading soldiers could advance up the beach and into the towns that lay in the distance.

Onboard each landing craft were four of the specialized Duplex Drive tanks. When the signal was given to launch, the first tank would proceed down the ramp of the landing craft and into the water where its inflatable canvas skirt would hopefully keep it afloat.

At 5:40 a.m., the signal was given to launch the tanks of C Company. The landing craft lowered their ramps and one by one the specialized Sherman tanks rumbled forward into the choppy waters that lay off Omaha Beach. Since there were four tanks on each landing craft, the crews could watch from their tank as each of the preceding vehicles on the boat went into the water. The sight must have been enough to make any man wish he were anywhere else but at the site of the greatest invasion in history. One by one the tanks of Company C slid into the water, and one by one they sank beneath the waves. As each tank slid beneath the surface of the water, the next one in line gunned its

engine and splashed off the ramp of the landing craft into the same water that had just swallowed up the preceding tank.

To say that this example was one of heroism on the part of the tank crews of Company C of the 741<sup>st</sup> Battalion is an understatement. Not one tank from Company C made it to shore. All were lost in the waters off Omaha, and as a result, the men of the 16<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division had little to no armored support in their landing zones.<sup>1</sup>

So, what happened to the armor on Omaha Beach in the first wave of the assault? The tragedy of Company C was not commonplace on D-Day. Even on Omaha, many tanks made it ashore. Without armored assistance, the men who made the landings would have suffered greater losses than they did. The story of the armored assault on Omaha beach is one of heroism and tragedy. It is a story of tactical failures and weather conditions that made an assault by amphibious armor unfeasible at best.

It is almost unfathomable to imagine an M4 Sherman Medium Tank, with a combat weight of over 69,000 pounds,<sup>2</sup> being launched into water of any condition. Yet, this is exactly the tank that would become known during the invasion as the D.D., or Duplex Drive tank. It was simply a modified Sherman with extra clutches that were connected to two propellers in the rear of the tank. The propellers were driven via the tank's own engines, and were designed to slowly\* move the tank from the water and onto the land, where the clutches could then be redirected to power the treads. The tank was able to float in near perfect conditions due to the addition of an inflatable canvas screen, which was attached to its periphery. The screen, when fully inflated, stood a mere 8-10"

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\* The speed of a D.D. tank while in the water was four miles per hour.

above the water line. It is therefore not difficult to see how the tanks of Company C were lost in waves that reached over four feet in height.

When the screen was inflated, the D.D. tank looked more like a loaf of bread than an armored vehicle.<sup>3</sup> It was the awkward appearance of the D.D. Tank that made it a shock to troops defending a beach that D.D. tanks landed on. The design for the D.D. tank was created by a Hungarian engineer named Nicholas Straussler.<sup>4</sup> Though the British Admiralty saw no redeeming features in Straussler's design, the D.D. tank was attractive to the British War Office, which wanted an amphibious shock weapon.

The D.D. tanks were to be used as close-support artillery, a job that the Sherman was not well suited for.<sup>5</sup> The Sherman tank was built for agility and mobility, unlike its German counterparts, which were built for strength. The Sherman was much more lightly armed and armored than the German tanks in service in 1944<sup>†</sup>, yet it was the Sherman tank that made up the backbone of the American and Allied tank forces, and therefore, it was the Sherman that was chosen to become an amphibious fighting vehicle.

The idea of a fully functioning armored tank that could "swim" out of the water, climb onto the shore and begin to fire its main gun at enemy positions was indeed an attractive one. The D.D. tank was a regular M4 Sherman tank. It had all of the Sherman's characteristics and armaments. Nothing was taken off or replaced to make the tank seaworthy. It could still fight as any other Sherman tank being used anywhere else in the Allied war. It was this fact that could make the D.D. tank invaluable during an

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<sup>†</sup> The Sherman tank had a 75mm main gun and was protected by armor that was less than 4" in the thickest places. One German tank used in 1944, the Panzer VI, the infamous Tiger, carried an 88mm gun and had armor that was 7.28 inches in its thickest place. The Sherman was no match for a Tiger in one on one, or two on one combat. There are reports of rounds fired by Sherman tanks bouncing right off the frontal armor of a Tiger. An 88mm round from a Tiger could easily pierce the armor of a Sherman, more often than not causing the tank to ignite into flames.

amphibious assault. Infantry that were pinned down on a hostile beach could benefit greatly from the firepower that a tank could provide.

In essence, the D.D. tank was a weapon designed for surprise. It was merely an unassuming object as it slowly made its way to shore. It could easily be mistaken for a canvas boat, and not a tank. This factor could possibly lead defenders to ignore the tanks as they waded ashore. Another great benefit of swimming tanks was that they eliminated the need for large, slow-moving landing craft that would have to beach themselves under heavy enemy fire in order to unload their cargo of armored vehicles. The landing craft could stay far offshore, out of the range of enemy guns. This was not only efficient in saving lives, but also in saving resources.

Keeping slow moving landing craft far away from the sights of German gunners was one of the vital lessons learned after Dieppe. Along with saving landing craft came the lesson of using tanks adapted to perform while partially submerged. At Dieppe, the British employed Churchill Tanks that had been fitted with snorkels to allow the engines to breathe while the body of the tank was partially submerged. These amphibious tanks seemed like a sound idea on the planning board, but in use at Dieppe they were an utter failure.<sup>6</sup> The smooth stones that lined the invasion beaches did not allow for the tanks to attain traction, so therefore, many foundered in the surf. Those tanks that did make it ashore became penned up in the German obstacle belts. Once they were contained in one place, and unable to climb the bluffs off the beach, the tanks became sitting targets for the Germans. As a result, 28 tanks were destroyed.

The Churchill tanks had been landed with the leading waves of infantry well before the German defenses had been silenced by the meager naval forces assembled that

day, or before the obstacles that littered the beach had been cleared. As a result, it was later recommended that, “ unless overwhelming fire support is available, tanks should not be landed until defenses have been captured and obstacles cleared.”<sup>7</sup> Amphibious tanks should be used to assist the infantry, just as the infantry should be used to assist the tanks. Armor and infantry work well together in a symbiotic relationship, yet when stacked against one another, it is hard to say which had the advantage.

While the amphibious Churchill tank was indeed a right step in the direction of building an amphibious armored shock weapon, more research and new ideas were needed before amphibious tanks could be used again. One of the new creations available after Dieppe were the specialized tanks created by the British. The British saw a need for tanks that would be able to swim ashore and perform a multitude of roles such as acting as bulldozers, mine destroyers, flamethrowers and as regular fighting vehicles. The specialized tanks became known as “Hobart’s Funnies”, and were named after General Percy Hobart of the British 79<sup>th</sup> Armored Division.<sup>8</sup> The new D.D. tank was one of “Hobart’s Funnies”, and would replace the snorkel tanks used at Dieppe.

As both the American and British planners struggled to develop sound plans for their invasion beaches, the British decided to utilize the new D.D. tanks in the first waves of the assault. They felt that the tanks would serve as shock weapons that could both surprise and destroy the enemy.

As time went on and the plans for the individual beaches came closer to completion, it was clear that on the beach code-named Omaha, there would indeed be D.D. tanks in the first waves of the assault. Not only would the tanks swim ashore to

deal with enemy defenses, but also, some would be loaded aboard LCTs and would serve as gun platforms that could assist the Navy with the pre-invasion bombardment.

The armor to be used on Omaha Beach was that of the Headquarters Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Group, and the tanks of the 741<sup>st</sup>, 743<sup>rd</sup>, 745<sup>th</sup>, and 747<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalions. These tank battalions and headquarter groups were attached to specific infantry regiments that would be making the assault. The Headquarters Company 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored was attached to the Headquarters 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. The 741<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion was attached to the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry, and the 743<sup>rd</sup> was attached to the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The 745<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion was to serve as the 1<sup>st</sup> Division reserves, and the 747<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion was to serve as part of the V Corps reserve, and would be used later in the assault.<sup>9</sup>

On the morning of the invasion, there would be three battalions of tanks on Omaha Beach. The battalions were broken down into companies of sixteen tanks each, and each company had a different landing zone and method of landing. The 741<sup>st</sup> and 743<sup>rd</sup> were organized into four companies: A, B, C and D. D Company of both battalions was left in England as a reserve force while B and C Companies were to be equipped with the new D.D. tanks that would swim ashore preceding the infantry. A Companies of both battalions would be landed from LCTs on the beaches that they were assigned to.

The individual companies of the 741<sup>st</sup> and 743<sup>rd</sup> Tank Battalions each had specific duties on D-Day. In the sectors given to the 743<sup>rd</sup>, B and C Companies, the D.D. tanks were to land on Dog Green and White five minutes prior to the infantry. A Company would be brought ashore on Dog Red and Easy Green at H-Hour with the infantry. In the sectors given to the 741<sup>st</sup>, B and C Companies were to land five minutes prior to the



infantry on beaches Easy Red and Fox Green, while A Company tanks would be brought ashore at H-Hour.<sup>10</sup>

That was the plan for the armored forces on D-Day. On the actual day of the invasion, events transpired which completely altered the well-laid plans of the First United States Army and the V Corps commanders. Even though he was forced to go along with the plans for the invasion, Force "O" Naval Commander-In-Chief, Rear Admiral Hall, was wary of using D.D. tanks in the first waves of assaulting troops. He feared the presence of well dug in troops and obstacles, and the impact that these two factors might have on the tanks.<sup>11</sup> While he had no choice but to go along with his orders, Admiral Hall's fears became realities on D-Day.

The armored forces that were to land on Omaha would do so under the pretense that enemy obstacles would have been cleared by the aerial bombardment along with the naval barrage. The armored forces understood the fact that if they landed on a beach that was littered with anti-tank obstacles, and defended by high-velocity anti-tank guns, their losses would be high.

The role that the amphibious and regular tanks would play during the assault would be vital to the success of the operation, and vital in assisting the infantry. The tanks had to make it ashore, or the soldiers struggling on the beaches would have been faced with an even more murderous fire than had the tanks been there and been able to knock out the German machineguns and other light weapons.

Along with the armored forces, the engineers were to play another vital role in the assault on Omaha. The engineers, from the Army and Navy, had the task of removing the dreaded obstacles that would be left standing after Montgomery's heavy aerial

bombardment. The role that the engineers were to play was crucial to the success of the operation; they had to clear the beach so that the landing craft did not become backed up in the obstacle belts, further delaying the following waves of infantry, and so that the tanks could move freely along the beaches.

As mentioned earlier, in Chapter One, there had been a significant amount of inter-service debate concerning who was responsible for which obstacles. The Navy, according to its own doctrine and pre-invasion practice in the Mediterranean, was responsible for clearing obstacles up to the high water mark.<sup>12</sup> This included all of the underwater obstacles that would become a significant threat during an amphibious invasion. The Navy had two methods for removing the underwater obstacles: drenching fire by naval vessels, and the actions performed by underwater demolitions teams.

The Army, on the other hand, did not feel that its ESBs, Engineer Special Brigades, should be responsible for clearing underwater or any of the other beach obstacles during the initial assault.<sup>13</sup> The Army attempted to justify its stance to the Navy by explaining that the ESBs were trained to perform certain tasks, and that assault breaching was not one of them. Therefore, taking the time to train its troops to conduct assault-breaching missions would make the men less prepared to perform their other vital duties. The Army also said that since the obstacles would impede the Navy's attempts to shuttle the men and materiel ashore on D-Day, they should therefore be responsible for clearing the obstructions themselves. According to author Adrien Lewis, this statement left little doubt, "that the ESBs did not want to be among the first units on Omaha Beach on D-Day."<sup>14</sup>

To counter the ESBs complaints that they did not wish to be ashore when all hell was breaking loose, and that the Navy should clear the underwater obstacles, it is appropriate to note that, according to Army Engineer doctrine, the engineers were responsible for clearing all obstacles and minefields that impeded the movement of the division they represented. Due to this matter of Army doctrine, the ESBs were indeed chosen to clear obstacles in the first waves of assaulting infantry. As a result of the newly acquired duties that the Army Engineers had to undertake, it was seen that the plans for Omaha were too large for such a small force. In March 1944, the Provisional Engineer Special Brigade Group was formed to maintain control of the two ESBs that would go ashore on D-Day.<sup>15</sup>

In the end, it was decided that the Naval Engineers would be subordinate to the Army Engineers. The Naval Beach Battalions, or NBBs, had served under the Army in North Africa. They had experience in landing and clearing lanes, but they were not large enough to handle the entire scenario on Omaha Beach.<sup>16</sup> It was decided that the NBBs would be responsible for the creation and transport of the floating Mulberry Harbors, and for the clearance of underwater obstacles up to the high water mark.<sup>17</sup> The ESBs would be responsible for clearing the mines and obstacles after the high water mark and in assisting the Navy in clearing the beaches once the beaches themselves were secure.<sup>18</sup> The two services were to work together and assist one another whenever necessary.

According to a field order issued by the Provisional Engineer Special Brigade, in May 1944, their duty on D-Day was to, “support the assault landings...and organize and operate all shore installations necessary for debarkation, supply, evacuation, and local security on order to assure the continuous movement of personnel...across the beach.”<sup>19</sup>

The ESBs would do their duty to support the infantry landings, and would, during the landing phase, come ashore attached to specific infantry units. Once ashore, they would detach from the infantry and set about their tasks of clearing the beaches and establishing transport and supply stations.<sup>20</sup>

Once ashore, the ESBs would destroy the obstacles and then perform another vital task; they would clear and open up the beach exits. Opening beach exits was a major objective of the D-Day assault. The Germans had blocked off some exits, while leaving others partially open, but well defended by concrete walls, anti-tank ditches, and any other means that would halt the invading troops on the beaches. The ESBs were needed to open these exits so that the infantry and armor could then advance inland and begin pushing the Germany Army ever farther back.

The Army Engineers that would go ashore were the 5<sup>th</sup> Engineer Special Brigade, the 6<sup>th</sup> Engineer Special Brigade and the 11<sup>th</sup> Port, which were troops that would assist in unloading men and vehicles off of the floating docks that the Navy had constructed. The NBBs would serve under the ESBs with the 6<sup>th</sup> NBB serving under the 5<sup>th</sup> ESB and the 7<sup>th</sup> NBB serving under the 6<sup>th</sup> ESB.<sup>21</sup> These engineer groups were trained in combat, but their experience and skills lay in engineering. They would come ashore with trucks, cranes, bulldozers and tractors; they would carry shovels and demolition devices that would be used to clear obstacles. They could fight if necessary, but their task on Omaha was to clear the remaining obstacles that had been left standing.

These men all knew their duties, and all felt secure in knowing that they would be going ashore a few minutes after the infantry and armor landed, and well after the naval and air forces had obliterated the German defenses and obstacles. As with the plans for

the armored forces, they too would be shocked by how different the conditions were on D-Day as compared to what they had been trained for.

The weather conditions on D-Day played havoc with the tanks and engineers. The heavy offshore seas forced many landing craft to come ashore in the wrong places, while the smoke that was the result of the pre-invasion bombardments hindered the identification of landmarks vital for navigation. The tide was coming in as the men and tanks made it ashore, and it would continue to rise one foot every ten minutes.<sup>22</sup> The rough swells made the ride in uncomfortable for the men aboard the landing craft, but for many of the men who would come ashore in D.D. tanks, the condition of the sea on D-Day was fatal.

It was into these unfavorable weather conditions and unscathed enemy defenses that the invasion of Omaha Beach was launched. It was at 5:40 a.m. that the D.D. tanks of B and C Companies of the 741<sup>st</sup> and 743<sup>rd</sup> Tank Battalions were to be launched into an uninviting sea.

The tanks of B and C Companies of the 741<sup>st</sup> were launched as planned. The tanks had 6000 yards of rough sea to swim through before they would reach the waiting muzzles of German anti-tank guns. The order was given to launch, and one by one the D.D. tanks, with a crew of five men each, entered into the sea. The thirty-two tanks of B and C Companies immediately ran into problems and began to founder one by one.<sup>23</sup>

On LCT 57, a landing craft carrying tanks, the first vehicle proceeded into the water and immediately sank beneath the waves. The next tank in line reversed its treads and backed up into the ship damaging either its canvas flotation screen or the ship's launching ramp.<sup>24</sup> The commander of the landing craft decided to run the ship onto the

beach and drop the tanks off on the shore due to the damaged ramp on his landing craft. These three tanks made it to the section of the Beach code-named Easy Red and began to fire at enemy positions.

The tanks onboard the damaged landing craft were lucky. Out of the thirty-two tanks of B and C Companies, twenty-seven were lost, including all of the tanks of C Company.<sup>25</sup> Two of the amphibious tanks managed to swim ashore under adverse conditions and landed on Easy Red with the three tanks of LCT 57. These five tanks represented all of the armored support available to the four boat sections of misguided infantry who landed on Easy Red.

At H-Hour, as the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry landed in many cases in the wrong places, the tanks of Company A of the 741<sup>st</sup> were landed by their LCTs on Easy Red. Onboard each LCT were two tanks and one tank dozer<sup>‡</sup>. Company A landed with only the loss of three vehicles when the LCT they were aboard exploded.<sup>26</sup>

The tanks of A and B Companies went into action as soon as they came ashore. The tanks spread out over the beaches code-named Easy Red and Fox Green. No sooner did they begin landing than the Germans began to use their anti-tank guns to destroy the tanks. The four boat sections of infantry who landed on Easy Red were a mixed group of men from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The men who landed on Fox Green were also a mixed group of boat sections from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup>. The men on these two beaches

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<sup>‡</sup> A tank dozer was a tank modified with a bulldozer blade. The purpose of the tank dozers was to assist the regular bulldozers on the beach in removing obstacles and clearing lanes through minefields.

came under heavy fire as they tried to clear out the E-1 and E-3 draws<sup>§</sup> that led off the beaches and up the bluffs. \*\*

Both enemy artillery and mines took a heavy toll on the tanks. The scattered infantry sought refuge from the withering German fire by hiding behind the beach obstacles that had been set up to stop them, and also by hiding behind the tanks. The tanks were not a safe hiding place for they were under constant fire and were the prime targets for the Germans.

At 11:00 a.m., the 16<sup>th</sup> RCT's commander ordered all of the tanks on the beaches in his sector to assemble at the E-3 draw to assist in opening the draw. Only three tanks assembled and two were put out of action as soon as they began climbing up the draw.<sup>27</sup>

By 11:30, after the assistance of one tank and fire from destroyers that practically scraped their bottoms on the sea floor, the men of the 18<sup>th</sup> RCT, which was a supporting wave of infantry, managed to open the E-1 draw. This egress became the main exit off the beach and into the countryside beyond.

The struggle for Easy Red and Fox Green was quite difficult for the men and tanks that were landed there. On these beaches, the Germans had numerous anti-tank guns and artillery pieces at their disposal. These guns quickly put many of the few tanks that had managed to land out of action.

In the section of the beach destined for the 16<sup>th</sup> RCT and the 741<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion, the use of D.D. tanks was a complete failure. The decision to launch the tanks in spite of the weather and sea conditions caused unnecessary casualties amongst the tankers. Had

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<sup>§</sup> The "draws" were designated by letters to coincide with the name of the beach they led off.

\*\* The E-3 draw which led up the bluffs on Fox Green was protected by both a 75mm and 88mm gun. These guns enfiladed the beach and caused numerous casualties.

all of the tanks been landed like those of LCT 57, the armored situation on Easy Red and Fox Green might have been quite different.

The 743<sup>rd</sup> Tank Battalion fared quite better than the 741<sup>st</sup>.<sup>28</sup> The tank flotilla was commanded by Lieutenant Dean L. Rockwell, who correctly surmised that the sea conditions did not welcome the launching of the mostly unseaworthy D.D. tanks. He gave the order for his eight LCTs to form a line abreast and run the tanks ashore where they would be landed without having to swim.<sup>29</sup> As a result of Rockwell's accurate appraisal of the sea conditions, the beach sectors that the men of the 116<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rangers were to land on had armored support.<sup>30</sup>

On the way in, eight of the tanks of Company B were lost when their LCTs were struck by artillery. The remaining tanks of Company B reached the shore at Dog Green, which was their intended beach. A few minutes later, the sixteen tanks of Company C reached the shore at Dog White and Easy Green. The tanks of A Company came ashore on beaches Easy Green and Dog Red at the same time as the D.D. tanks. As a result of the decision to carry the tanks in, all of the tanks, aside from those lost to artillery, intended for the 116<sup>th</sup> RCT made it ashore.<sup>31</sup>

The eight tanks of B Company took heavy fire and suffered heavy casualties on Dog Green. Almost as soon as the tanks left the landing craft they came under the fire of an 88mm gun that was enfilading the beach. This gun knocked out a few of the tanks, but soon shifted its fire away from the tanks to the swarms of men and landing craft of Company A of the 116<sup>th</sup> RCT.

Some tank crews left their tanks in the water where they kept a relatively low profile. From the imagined protection of the sea, they began firing their guns at the



German casemates. Though they were partially hidden, many of these tanks took heavy fire from the Germans. The D-1 exit was not open until 11:00 p.m. The heavy German fire caused numerous casualties amongst the tanks, but the tanks did land, and were able to draw some fire off of the embattled infantry.

The terrible losses of D.D. tanks on Omaha led the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief to say, concerning D.D. tanks, that on D-Day, “conditions could not have been less ideal for this novel weapon.”<sup>32</sup> This is a fair and accurate statement. The heavy seas were too high for the canvas skirt that surrounded the tanks. There are even reports of tank commanders attempting to use their own bodies to push the canvas screens back against the onrushing sea.

Had the tanks of the 743<sup>rd</sup> tank Battalion been launched as planned, it is almost certain that they too would have suffered the fate of the tanks of the 741<sup>st</sup>. The research report, “Armor In Operation Neptune”, concludes that, “The former design of D.D. tanks did not give them seaworthiness.”<sup>33</sup>

It is important to remember, when discussing the role played by D.D. tanks on Omaha, that the beach was defended by eighteen anti-tank guns, the strongest anti-tank gun concentration on any of the invasion beaches.<sup>34</sup> These guns destroyed many tanks and landing craft and their accurate and murderous fire resulted in numerous casualties. The tanks that did make it ashore through the heavy enemy fire and through the rough seas did so in small numbers and were therefore unable to do much by themselves. As mentioned earlier, armor works best when used with infantry. One tank fighting alone will likely be destroyed much quicker than a tank accompanied by infantry that can protect it.

It is clear that armor is an important factor in an assault on well dug in troops. Tanks serve as a morale booster for the infantry that is fighting with them, while at the same time they serve as a deterrent to those who have to face them in combat. However, there is no purpose to using swimming tanks in an amphibious assault unless sea conditions allow it. Therefore, there is little to no purpose in using a weapons system such as the D.D. tank in combat unless it has been proven capable of dealing with inclement weather and less than perfect battlefield conditions.

Another conclusion of the report issued by the Naval Commander-In-Chief was that, although the plan for using D.D. tanks was sound, it was not suitable under the conditions that met the men on D-Day.<sup>35</sup> This is a statement that leads to many conclusions as to why the assault on Omaha produced so many casualties. The planners created rigid plans and stuck with them even though the conditions on D-Day did not facilitate the execution of these plans.

Author Max Hastings, in his book, Overlord<sup>36</sup>, implies that had the Americans used more of the British specialized armor, (i.e., flail tanks, flamethrower tanks, etc.), they would have fared better. It is not clear how British armor would have fared any better under the intense fire that enfiladed Omaha Beach. No matter what type of armor was used, the fact remains that armor on Omaha was an easy target for German gunners.

Within moments of the invasion, General Bradley knew that for all intents and purposes, the D.D. tanks had been a failure. He states that, "Our troops had not yet landed and already two critical supports for the assault had broken down."<sup>37</sup> The other failure that Bradley referred to was that of the aerial bombardment which had left Omaha Beach unscathed. It must have been terrible for the man who was responsible for so

many lives to see the plans that he and his subordinates had labored over for so long come unraveled right in front of him.

Not only did the armored forces suffer losses on D-Day. The engineers, whose jobs were so vital to the assault, also took heavy casualties. They, unlike the crews of the D.D. tanks, did not suffer due to the decisions made by officers far off shore, but rather, they suffered alongside the infantrymen who landed and met a wall of enemy fire.

The engineers were to land at H+3 minutes after the initial landing. They were then to clear sixteen gaps in the obstacles. No later than H+8 minutes, eight support teams and two command teams were to land to assist the initial engineers with their duties.<sup>38</sup> Along with the engineers, tank dozers and tractors would be landed alongside the regular tanks. These heavy vehicles would be used to push aside obstacles, clear minefields or even bury the embrasures in the fronts of pillboxes.

The weather that had caused rough seas that swamped D.D. tanks also caused the landing craft that carried the infantry and engineers ashore to steer off course. Coupled with a lack of visual recognition of landmarks that had been obscured by the clouds and the smoke on the beach, many landing craft touched down far away from where they were scheduled to land.

It did not take long for utter confusion to break out amongst the landing craft flotilla. The engineers were relatively lightly armed and not trained to act as primary fighting men. Therefore, they were scheduled to land a few minutes after the infantry, and since their tasks were seen as vital to the success of the assault, they were spread out and not in complete units in order to avoid losing a complete unit to an enemy shell.<sup>39</sup> The gap in the time of the landing would give the infantrymen time to work with the

tanks to knock out the defenses before the engineers landed. What really happened was the worst nightmare of the ESB leaders who had so vehemently argued against their troops touching down during the initial assault.

The confusion of the landings led to the Gap Assault Teams, the initial engineers who were to land and blow gaps in the obstacles, to embark five minutes before the infantry.<sup>40</sup> The Gap Assault Teams that did not land before the infantry became mixed in with their assault, and did not come ashore in the order that had been planned.

As the landing craft neared the shore, the Germans opened fire with artillery and mortars. When the ramps were lowered and the men prepared to exit the landing craft, murderous machinegun fire, joined by more artillery and mortar fire, erupted. Of sixteen LCMs, Landing Craft Mechanized, that carried the Gap Assault Teams ashore, shells hit eight of them.<sup>41</sup> One of the Gap Assault Teams, which was the first to land, did so on Easy Red well in advance of the infantry, and as the men prepared to exit the vehicle, a shell struck and killed most of the NBB team that was aboard.

Along with the inaccuracy of the landings, the engineers had to deal with heavy fire and infantrymen who saw the obstacles not as devices employed to harm them, but as structures they could hide behind. This factor, plus the heavy casualties that caused many engineer teams to be low on men and equipment, resulted in most teams only blowing partial gaps in the obstacles.<sup>42</sup> The engineers were Army and Navy men, and they could not force themselves to threaten or remove the infantry who were huddled behind the obstacles. The longer they waited, the higher the tide rose, and at one foot every ten minutes, any delay would result in more and more obstacles being covered by water.

On Easy Red, one team, after seeing that all of the infantry was gone from behind the obstacles, set about the laborious process of rigging the obstacles for demolition, while under heavy fire. With the vital gap in the obstacles wired to blow, the engineers were ready to detonate it when a German mortar round struck the primacord, and set off the explosives prematurely. The ensuing blast killed ten engineers, wounded nine more, and did great damage to the infantrymen who lay huddled nearby.<sup>43</sup>

Stories such as this were not uncommon for the engineers on D-Day. The problem was that they were forced to work under adverse conditions that they had not expected. Another problem was that the landing craft they rode ashore in were loaded down with TNT and other demolition material. When these craft struck mines, or were hit by enemy shells, what could have been a small explosion became a catastrophic blast that more often or not wiped out entire Gap Teams.<sup>44</sup> One account of the artillery fire that the engineers faced stated that it was, “unbelievably accurate...Not a shell was wasted getting the range. Each was a direct hit.”<sup>45</sup>

The armored bulldozers the engineers expected to assist in obstacle clearance were, for the most part, nonexistent. Many were sitting at the bottom of the Channel, and those that did land were immediately picked off by German gunners. The engineers had only themselves to rely on, and the majority of them were scattered and wounded.

The support wave of engineers which was to land no later than H+8 minutes was also scattered by the sea and by the enemy fire that rained on them. The tide pushed most of the supporting teams farther east, and they landed scattered in groups somewhere between 6:40 and 7:45 in the morning.<sup>46</sup> The command groups that were scheduled to

land with the supporting waves were also delayed by the smoke that hid the beaches and by enemy fire. They too landed in the wrong places and at the wrong times.

By 7:00, the time that the follow up wave of infantry was to land, only five small gaps out of sixteen planned gaps had been cleared. These gaps were not properly marked, and therefore served little function in guiding the supporting landing craft to shore safely. This was not the fault of the engineers. They had done their best to clear and mark lanes while at the same time trying not to get killed, or force the infantry who were desperately seeking cover from the enemy, out into the open where they faced certain danger. The chaos on the beach led a 7<sup>th</sup> NBB beachmaster to order a temporary halt to the landing of troops in the sector designated for the 29<sup>th</sup> I.D.<sup>47</sup> Heavy casualties, wrecked vehicles and landing craft littered the beach and made further landings impossible until room could be made.

As the morning went on and the battle raged, many engineers were forced to fight with the infantry to keep themselves alive. While this was not part of the ESB doctrine, it was part of the bond of soldiers; these men of different services and professions chose to fight together to save one another.

All in all, the Army and Navy engineers suffered 41% casualties in the first assault on Omaha. This is a truly tragic figure largely due to the heavy fire that the engineers faced. Like the crews of the tanks, the engineers pressed on even when the situation seemed hopeless, but through their hard work and sacrifice, the follow up waves were able to land bit by bit, and were ultimately able to secure Omaha Beach.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 4

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- <sup>1</sup> The above information comes from: US Army War College, A Research Report prepared by, Committee 10, Officers Advanced Course, The Armored School. "Armor In Operation Neptune, (Establishment Of The Normandy Beachhead)", May 1949. pgs 79-80
- <sup>2</sup> Foss, Christopher F, ed. An Illustrated Guide To World War II Tanks And Fighting Vehicles. New York: Arco Publishing, 1981. pg. 128
- <sup>3</sup> Gawne, Jonathan. Spearheading D-Day, American Special Units In Normandy. Paris: Histoire Collections, 1999. pg. 159
- <sup>4</sup> Howarth, pg. 142
- <sup>5</sup> Holderfield, and Varhola. pg. 89
- <sup>6</sup> "Combined Report on the Dieppe Raid."
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid* pg. 45
- <sup>8</sup> Ambrose, Stephen. D-Day. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994. pg. 54
- <sup>9</sup> "Armor In Operation Neptune, (Establishment Of The Normandy Beachhead)".pg. 77
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*. pgs. 136-138.
- <sup>11</sup> "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force June 1944". Ch.2. pg. 4
- <sup>12</sup> Lewis. pg. 195
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*. pg. 195
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*. pg. 196
- <sup>15</sup> Gawne. pg. 254
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*. pg. 227
- <sup>17</sup> Headquarters PROV ENGR SP BRIG GROUP, [Field Order No 3]. pg. 1
- <sup>18</sup> Lewis. pg. 198
- <sup>19</sup> Headquarters PROV ENGR SP BRIG GROUP, [Field Order No 3]. pg. 1
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*. pg. 2
- <sup>21</sup> Gawne. Pg. 228
- <sup>22</sup> Provisional Engineer Special Brigade Group. [Operation Report Neptune: Omaha Beach-26 February-26 June 1944]. 30 September 1944. pg. 81
- <sup>23</sup> "Armor In Operation Neptune, (Establishment Of The Normandy Beachhead)".pg. 79
- <sup>24</sup> Gawne, pg. 164
- <sup>25</sup> "Armor In Operation Neptune, (Establishment Of The Normandy Beachhead)".pg. 79
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*. pg. 80
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*. pg. 83.
- <sup>28</sup> [Operation Report Neptune: Omaha Beach-26 February-26 June 1944]. Pg. 83
- <sup>29</sup> Howarth. pg. 146
- <sup>30</sup> "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force June 1944". Ch.4. pg. 4
- <sup>31</sup> "Armor In Operation Neptune, (Establishment Of The Normandy Beachhead)". pgs 79-80
- <sup>32</sup> Report C.B. 004385A. Report by The Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief. "Expeditionary Force on Operation Neptune", October 1944. pg. 58
- <sup>33</sup> Research Report, Armored School. pg. 118
- <sup>34</sup> "Comparison of British and American Areas in Normandy in terms of Fire Support and its Effects". pg. 9

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* pg 60.

<sup>36</sup> Hastings, Max. Overlord. New York: Simon and Schuster. pg. 90

<sup>37</sup> Bradley. pg. 268

<sup>38</sup> [Operation Report Neptune: Omaha Beach-26 February-26 June 1944]. pg. 80

<sup>39</sup> Gawne. pg. 236

<sup>40</sup> [Operation Report Neptune: Omaha Beach-26 February-26 June 1944]. pg. 83

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 84

<sup>42</sup> "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force June 1944". Ch. 4. pg 7

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 85

<sup>44</sup> Lewis. pg. 23

<sup>45</sup> [Operation Report Neptune: Omaha Beach-26 February-26 June 1944]. pgs. 94-95

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 85

<sup>47</sup> Gawne. pg. 237



## CHAPTER 5

### THE FIRST WAVE OF INFANTRY

The following excerpt comes from the written testimony of Randolph A. Ginman, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Company D of the 116<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team<sup>1</sup>:

“We had gotten to within approximately 250 ft. of the beach when machinegun bursts started hitting our boat. We continued on for another 100 feet and then the ramp was dropped and out we jumped as fast as we could and dropped as flat as we could into a foot or so of water that was washing in with the tide. At least 4 “D” Company men were hit, one of them was my good buddy, Tom McArtor, who was hit and floundering around and crying out for me to come and help him. As much as I wanted to I was busy giving Sgt. Joe Trona first aid because he was lying next to me shot through the right wrist. Tom McArtor drowned before anyone could get to him. Both of the English Sailors lay draped over the side of our Landing Craft and they too had been killed by machinegun fire. Those of us that got out of the Landing Craft and dropped in the water couldn’t move because of the constant grazing fire from the pillbox at the foot of the Vierville Draw.”

Randolph Ginman and the men of his landing craft had landed on the beach code-named Dog Green. They had landed in front of the draw that led to the town of Vierville-sur-Mer. This particular section of Omaha Beach saw some of the worst carnage of the entire Normandy landing. The men of D Company, along with the other men of the 116<sup>th</sup> RCT of the 29th I.D., and the 16<sup>th</sup> RCT of the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D., had landed that morning under the false presumption that the beach had been obliterated by the pre-invasion bombardments. They also believed that the amphibious tanks had landed en masse minutes before they themselves touched down. When the infantry of the first wave landed, they were not

greeted by a beach that had been decimated by heavy fire, but, in fact, many of them landed on a beach that greeted them with heavy fire.

The planners had broken down Omaha Beach into smaller, individual beaches so that the two RCTs of the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D. \* could land within clearly defined barriers. The initial landings involved approximately 1500 men who were to touch down at H+1 minute (6:31).<sup>2</sup> The two RCTs had been assigned sectors of the beach, and both RCTs had specific goals for D-Day. The 16<sup>th</sup> RCT was to advance forward and maintain contact with the British on their left, the eastern section of the beach, while the 116<sup>th</sup> was to advance inland and maintain contact with the Americans landing on Utah Beach to the right, on the western section.<sup>3</sup>

The 116<sup>th</sup> RCT was to land on the right side of Omaha at the beaches code-named Dog Green, Dog White, Dog Red, and Easy Green. To the right of Dog Green was Charlie Beach. Here, a company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion was to land. The 16<sup>th</sup> RCT was given the beaches Easy Red, Fox Green, and Fox Red to land on. Fox Red was to remain open on D-Day with no one landing on it, but the beach itself fell under the control of the 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>4</sup>

Each regimental front of the beach was close to 3000 yards long, and the plans called for each landing craft to come ashore within 50 yards of its assigned spot. This plan relied on normal sea conditions and enemy defenses that would be inactive so as not to disrupt the landing craft as they sailed toward the beach. As has already been stated, the weather on D-Day was not suitable for rigid plans; neither were the awaiting German

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\* The 1<sup>st</sup> I.D. made the landing on D-Day with one RCT of the 29<sup>th</sup> I.D. Even though the 29<sup>th</sup> landed, it fell under the provisional leadership of the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D.

defenders prepared to idly wait for the landing craft to make their way ashore in an orderly and timely fashion.

Of the two divisions that would be making the landing on Omaha, only the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D., the “Big Red One”, had combat experience. The 1<sup>st</sup> had made landings in Oran, Algeria in 1942, and in Sicily in 1943,<sup>5</sup> and in October 1943 had been called back to England to prepare for the invasion. The 1<sup>st</sup> was the Army’s most trusted and experienced division and Generals Eisenhower and Bradley both thought that the 1<sup>st</sup> should be involved in the invasion. The division was commanded by Maj. General Clarence Huebner, who had received his command in the summer of 1943.

Landing with the 1<sup>st</sup> was a reinforcing element of the 29<sup>th</sup> I.D., a National Guard division with a long-standing military tradition in the United States.<sup>†</sup> Until he had begun planning the assault on Omaha, General Gerow commanded the 29<sup>th</sup>, but when he was called up lead the V Corps, he relinquished his command to Maj. General Charles Gerhardt.<sup>6</sup> On D-Day, the 29<sup>th</sup> would send the 116<sup>th</sup> RCT in on the initial landing, and would use the 115<sup>th</sup> as a secondary wave. Since the 116<sup>th</sup> was to be used as an assault regiment attached to the 16<sup>th</sup>, it was organized into companies that in turn were organized into six, thirty-one-man boat teams that would be shuttled to the disembarkation point by a single landing craft, and then brought ashore in smaller craft.

Positioned on the right of the 116<sup>th</sup> was C Company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion. These men were to land on Charlie Beach, and knock out enemy emplacements at Pointe de la Percee, a locale west of Vierville-sur-mer.<sup>7</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger had two companies that

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<sup>†</sup> The 29<sup>th</sup> was made up of units whose military lineages lay on both sides of the fighting in the Civil War. This earned the division the nickname, “The Blue and Gray Division”. The men who made up the 29<sup>th</sup> were mostly men of the same general geographic region: Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Many of

were set aside as reinforcements to C Company. They would land on Charlie with C Company if necessary.<sup>‡</sup>

These were the men who were to touch down on Omaha at H-Hour. These men were well trained and some were battle tested. The infantry had been promised that the Navy and Air Forces would pummel the beach until it was cratered with hiding places, and until the German defenses were destroyed. If the bombardments had not destroyed all of the emplacements, the swimming tanks would clean up the remaining Germans. This was what they expected. Of course, these were not the conditions they met when they came ashore.

The infantry were to ride ashore in specialized landing craft. Some came ashore in LCVPs<sup>§</sup>, otherwise known as a Higgins' Boat. These boats, along with LCAs<sup>\*\*</sup>, the British version of the LCVP, carried the assault teams ashore. They were flat-bottomed, shallow draft boats that had minimal seagoing qualities,<sup>8</sup> and did not function well on days such as June 6, 1944. The rough seas and heavy loads that these boats carried forced many beneath the waves. One other type of landing craft was the LCI, or Landing Craft Infantry. The LCI was a much larger craft that could carry an entire infantry company ashore where it would deposit the men on the beach. It was slow and large and was therefore an excellent target for enemy fire.<sup>9</sup> The soundness of the landing craft was as vital a part of the assault as the soundness of the infantrymen who were to go ashore.

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the men came from the same towns and as a result, many towns lost most of the men who had gone off to fight on D-Day.

<sup>‡</sup> A Provisional Ranger Force under the command of Lt. Col. James Rudder was to land with 200 men at the base of Pointe du Hoc. These men were to scale the cliffs and destroy the dreaded battery that supposedly lay there. This is an entirely different story, and while the men who landed at Pointe du Hoc deserve the same accolades as the other men who landed at Omaha, their story does not fit into this paper.

<sup>§</sup> Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel

<sup>\*\*</sup> Landing Craft Assault

Prior to the assault, the planners studied the carrying capacity of the LCVs and the LCAs, and determined that they should not be overloaded with men on D-Day. The issue of loading the landing craft posed certain problems though; infantry companies are traditionally organized into rifle and special weapons platoons, and are taught to fight and operate in cohesive groups. The basic structure for an infantry company was that of three rifle platoons and one special weapons platoon. On D-Day, companies would come ashore not in rifle platoons, but in assault sections. There were five assault sections per company, and the assault sections were then broken down and placed aboard appropriate landing craft.<sup>10</sup>

A single assault team would be loaded onto one Higgins' boat, and comprised of one officer and twenty-nine men. There would be a five-man rifle team, a four-man wire cutting team, two two-man BAR<sup>††</sup> teams, two two-man bazooka teams, a four-man mortar team, a two-man flamethrower team, a five-man demolitions team, the boat team leader, or officer, and one assistant boat team leader, or NCO.<sup>11</sup>

The boat team leader, the officer whom the enlisted men trusted and relied on for direction, stood in the front left side of the boat, closest to the ramp. When the ramp was lowered, he would lead his men off and into the surf. This is how the assault had been practiced, and this was what was supposed to happen on D-Day.

While this boat organization seemed sound, it broke up the normal company integrity in which the men had been trained. It was thought that unit integrity was vital to combat efficiency; men liked to fight as a complete unit, not broken up into sub-units that better fit onto landing craft. Not even General Huebner agreed with the new assault unit

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<sup>††</sup> Browning Automatic Rifle

tactics, but in the end, he was forced to go along with what his superiors felt was a better plan.<sup>12</sup>

Each man carried his own weapon with him. If he was a rifleman, he carried the standard M1 Garand, a rifle with a fully loaded weight of just less than ten pounds. If he was a BAR man, he carried his automatic rifle that weighed just under twenty pounds.<sup>13</sup> The men also carried a life preserver, a gas mask, grenades, some TNT, rations, cigarettes, first aid kit, an entrenching tool, a knife and whatever special equipment they might need for their own personal duties.<sup>14</sup> The soldiers, when fully loaded, weighed between sixty to ninety pounds over their own normal weight. Add twenty nine men who are grossly overweight, add cumbersome equipment, put them on a landing craft that had a shallow draft, was made of plywood, and could not stand up to strong seas or heavy enemy fire, and you had the makings of a serious problem.

The infantrymen sailed toward Omaha from the ports of England aboard larger LCTs and other transports. These larger naval vessels stayed offshore ten to eleven miles where they were out of the range of enemy guns. It was from here that the loading process began at around 4:00 in the morning. The infantrymen, heavily laden with gear and weapons, were forced to scramble down cargo nets into the awaiting LCVPs and LCAs. The rough seas caused the boats to pitch and roll. Many men fell from the nets and plummeted into the sea, or into the bottoms of the boats below. There were casualties even before the assault had begun.

Randolph Ginman was one of the men who was awaiting his destiny off Omaha. As a member of Company D of the 116<sup>th</sup>, he was scheduled to touch down on Dog Green

at 7:00. He and his fellow soldiers endured the pitching seas and rolling boats and made the climb down the nets.

“The water had gotten rougher and it was pretty tricky jumping into the landing craft from the nets at the right time. When all the boats were loaded we circled once or twice and then headed for the portion of the Normandy Coast known as Omaha Beach.”<sup>15</sup>

Once aboard, the men were forced to endure biting cold winds that brought the icy sea spray back into their faces. Many men who had eaten breakfast became ill due to the pitching boats and the sheer nervousness surrounding the entire operation.<sup>16</sup> The landing craft circled in groups until they were given the signal at around 4:30 to straighten out and begin the arduous journey in.<sup>17</sup>

From within the small landing craft, the men could see and hear the battleships, cruisers and destroyers pummeling Omaha. They felt that there was no way anyone could be left alive on the beach once they touched down. They had been promised that this would be an easy trip, and that the real war would begin once they ascended the bluffs and began moving into the Normandy countryside. The men nervously circled and then the boats formed up in a way that mimicked a cavalry charge of the past.

Harley A Reynolds, an infantryman in B Company of the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry, was one of the many men who took part in the assault. He remembers the emotions and feelings of the trip towards the shore.

“I saw and heard the coxswain say to the other crewman, “ ‘This is it. Here we go,’ as he waved forward, like a cavalryman to the other craft. I remember watching the coxswain. He seemed calm stationed in the armored box on the port stern. It gave me confidence in him.”<sup>18</sup>

For an outsider to even attempt to understand how these men felt is impossible. These men were mostly 20 year-old kids who had never seen combat, never killed, never

been shot at and never been anywhere but the United States. They were expected to land on a beach, in front of high bluffs that housed German guns, and they were expected to keep moving under enemy fire and not to help their wounded friends. The emotions that they felt as they slowly made their way toward the shore must have been mixed: some probably felt scared, some were possibly calm because they assumed that the Navy and Air Force would bombard the beach and all of its inhabitants back into the ground and some may have felt brave. However they felt individually, it was a matter of how they reacted once they were ashore that would make all the difference in deciding the success or failure of this assault.

The men, no matter how poorly they felt, had their morale boosted by the sight of the hundreds of bombers flying overhead. The planes darkened the sky like a giant flock of birds, or even like the biblical swarms of locusts that darkened the skies over Egypt. The whistling of the bombs and the distant thuds of the explosions made the men in the landing craft feel safe in knowing that they would make it ashore alive. Then, as they got closer to the beach, the rocket ships fired their salvo at the beach. Thousands of rockets hissed overhead flying straight toward the coastline. The men felt reassured. One man who was going ashore recalled the rocket attack, “it certainly was an impressive and cheering sight.”<sup>19</sup>

Many preparations had been made to prevent the infantry from suffering too much harm, but in the end it was not enough. The pre-invasion bombardment had been too short and too much time had been spent protecting the fleet; the D.D. tanks, which were to protect the men once ashore, were sinking in the same waters that the landing craft



were crossing; and finally, the weather had altered the precise timetable and schedule, making landing in an exact location next to impossible.

Throughout the trip in towards the shore, the heavily laden LCVPs and LCAs began to founder. The heavy weight of men loaded down with gear and weapons, mixed with three to four foot swells and a strong wind, made the job of keeping the boats pointed toward their target beaches quite difficult. The strong current continuously pushed landing craft farther and farther off course. Men, such as Randolph Ginman, were forced to bail out the craft in order to stay afloat.

“It was an unusually rough trip and because of the high waves we started taking on quite a bit of water. About half a dozen of us took off our helmets and started to bail out the water.”<sup>20</sup>

Even though many men were forced to bail out their landing craft, many boats sank beneath the waves. The heavy seas were simply too much for the small wooden craft. The current pushed the boats along to the east and many coxswains who were attempting to keep their craft pointed in the right directions by fighting the current pushed their craft too far against the current and exposed their boats to the waves. With the landing craft facing at odd angles, the waves overcame the sides of the boats and many were swamped with the heavily laden infantrymen sinking beneath the waves with their boats.

The anxious men who were sailing ashore were confronted by another strange phenomenon prior to touching down on the beach. The German guns were silent. Had the bombardment eliminated them all? No, the German gunners were given orders to hold their fire until the enemy landing craft were practically upon them. At a mere 400 yards, the guns opened up.<sup>21</sup> Machineguns, mortars, anti-tank guns, rockets, and rifles all

came to bear on the lead craft. Coupled with the heavy enemy fire and the untouched obstacle belts, the landing craft began to take serious damage.

The men of the 29<sup>th</sup> I.D. came ashore on the western portion of the beach. A Company was scheduled to land at H+1 on Dog Green. They were to assault the beach and open the draw that led to Vierville-sur-Mer. Here on Dog Green, the Germans had placed the most serious defenses of the entire beach and possibly of the entire invasion region. There were three major resistance nets in place at the Vierville exit<sup>22</sup>, also known as D-1. These resistance nets were loaded with heavy artillery pieces, 88mm guns, and were protected by pillboxes and concrete casemates. The Germans were not prepared to give up the D-1 exit easily.

Company A, of the 116<sup>th</sup>, was the only company of the 116<sup>th</sup> RCT to land in the appropriate place on the morning of the invasion.<sup>23</sup> The boats carrying A Company touched down at 6:35, a few minutes behind schedule, but in the right place. One landing craft struck a submerged obstacle and was disabled 100 to 150 yards off the shore. Many of the men aboard were too heavy to stay afloat, and sank as a result.

As the boats carrying A Company neared the shore, they began to take fire. The German machineguns and artillery rounds began to land around them. Many bullets struck the landing craft and put holes in them, forcing the men to bail out the boats, or face drowning. Finally, the boats reached the beach at 6:35, and the ramps were lowered. What occurred next was one of the greatest tragedies in military history. Within a few minutes, Company A of the 116<sup>th</sup> RCT of the 29<sup>th</sup> I.D., the Blue and Grey Division, as it was known, ceased to exist as a cohesive fighting unit.

Thomas Valence was one of the men of Company A.

“As we came down the ramp, we were in the water about knee high, and we started to do what we had been trained to do—move forward, and crouch and fire...I saw tracers coming from a concrete emplacement which to me looked mammoth...I floundered in the water and had my hand up in the air, trying to get my balance, when I was first shot.”<sup>24</sup>

George Roach was another A Company man who landed on Omaha.

“Lieutenant Anderson (The Boat Team leader)<sup>††</sup>, was twenty-five to thirty yards in front, waving his hand for us to move forward, and suddenly there was no more sign of life from him.”<sup>25</sup>

The men of Company A, like all of the other infantrymen who landed on D-Day, had been trained to follow their officers, and were instilled with a sense of respect and allegiance to the men who led them. Since the officers and boat team leaders stood at the front of the landing craft, they were more often than not the first ones hit when the ramps went down. The enlisted men were suddenly without leadership.<sup>26</sup> The NCOs in the backs of the landing craft had to get the men to move forward in the face of heavy enemy fire. It is no shock that many men froze in the face of the enormous German casemates that spewed machinegun bullets at them.

Within moments, A Company had ceased to exist as a unit. The casualty rate ran as high as 66%.<sup>27</sup> The men, many wounded, huddled behind the obstacles that had been erected to halt their advance. They floated in the water until the tide could carry them forward like pieces of flotsam. Some were lucky and were able to run to the seawall where the German gunners had no angle from which to shoot at them. There, against the seawall, they lay huddled, bleeding and greatly disorganized with no officers to tell them what to do. Most of the men were unarmed, their weapons laying on the sand, or sitting

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<sup>††</sup> Parenthesis added by author

at the bottom of the Channel. They had no hope of overcoming the defenses in the state that they were in.

This was not the assault that Bradley had envisioned. With all of the planning and all of the care, one company out of four from the first wave of the 116<sup>th</sup> RCT made it to the right beach, and when they did land, it was decimated.

The other Companies of the 116<sup>th</sup> were scheduled to land at H+1 to the east of Dog Green on the beaches code-named Dog White, Dog Red and Easy Green. Company G was to land on Dog White, which was the beach next to Dog Green, F Company, was to land next to G Company on Dog Red, and Company E was to land on Easy Green.<sup>28</sup> This is how they were supposed to land, but in reality, what happened to these companies is one of the greatest examples of what went wrong with the infantry landing on Omaha.

The strong current pushed the landing craft steadily eastward, causing the assault teams to become jumbled together and facing the wrong landing zones. Company G, the Company scheduled to land on Dog White, actually landed on Easy Green, a sector two beaches away from its designated landing zone. Company F, which was to land on the right<sup>§§</sup> side of G Company, landed on the left side straddling Dog Red and Easy Green. The most remarkable foul up was that of E Company, which was to land on Easy Green, but landed strung out over two miles eastward mixed in with the boats of the 16<sup>th</sup> RCT. Two boat sections of E Company landed on Easy Red along with two boat sections of the 16<sup>th</sup>. A further four boat sections of E Company landed on Fox Green, the beach where the DD tanks of C Company of the 741<sup>st</sup> were lost.

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<sup>§§</sup> The demarcation of left and right shall be presented as if one was looking from the shore. With this said, the beaches would start on the far left with Charlie, and end on the far right with Fox Red.

These foul ups were somewhat beneficial to the men of the 116<sup>th</sup>. Dog White, the beach that bordered the infamous Dog Green, was protected by a strongpoint hidden in a villa known as Hamel-du-Prêtre.<sup>29</sup> On Dog White, the German defenders focused their fire on Dog Green due to the simple fact that they had no one else to shoot at. This was merely the final nail in the coffin that A Company was in already.

Frank Simeone, an infantryman of Company G, recalls his own harrowing account of landing on Easy Green.

“Since we landed wrong by approximately a thousand yards, it was a complete shambles and highly disorganized. Our objective for the day was to go up to the Vierville draw and start our approach as a company of infantry after going through all of the fortification of the beach itself.”<sup>30</sup>

Sergeant Harry Bare of F Company also landed on D-Day. He retells his story here.

“Company F assault boat landed on Dog Red Beach, further east than planned. In spite of all this, the plans made back in England just didn’t exist in reality when we hit the beach. Fire rained down on us, machinegun, rifle, rockets from the bunkers on top of the cliff...As a ranking noncom, I tried to get my men off the boat and make it somehow to the cliff, but it was horrible—men frozen in the sand, unable to move. My radioman had his head blown off three yards from me. The beach was covered with bodies—men with no legs, no arms—God, it was awful. It was absolutely terrible.”<sup>31</sup>

Charles Neighbor, an infantryman aboard the scattered landing craft of E Company, remembers the confusion and terror of that fateful morning.

“We were two miles east from where we were supposed to have been. When we landed, I couldn’t see anything that remotely resembled anything that I was supposed to have seen...we started seeing other people around there, and it turned out that they were 1<sup>st</sup> Division. We weren’t where we were supposed to be. We didn’t know what was wrong.”<sup>32</sup>

The men who landed in the wrong places were confused, they were scattered, and they were under enemy fire for the first time in their lives. They had landed not where they were scheduled to land and not where they had been trained to land. The objectives that they had been given were nowhere in sight, yet they understood that they had to get off the beaches that they were on. The plans for the invasion hinged on the men moving off the beaches and into the countryside. This is what the men had to do, and they had to do it regardless of the fact that they were not where they had been trained to land. It was up to the officers who made the landings to see to it that the men did not simply hunker down and hide on the beaches as the tide came in and swallowed them up.

The men of the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D. did not fare any better than the men of the 29<sup>th</sup>. The 16<sup>th</sup> RCT was to land on beaches Easy Red and Fox Green. Fox Red Beach was to remain under their control, but no one was to land there. Companies E and F of the 16<sup>th</sup> were to land on Easy Red, and Companies I and L were to land on Fox Green. These landing craft, like those that carried the men of the 116<sup>th</sup>, became lost due to the smoke on the beaches and due to the heavy current.

Only two boat sections, around sixty men from E Company of the 16<sup>th</sup>, landed in the correct zone on Easy Red. There, they were surprised to find two boatloads of men from E Company of the 116<sup>th</sup>. Here, on Easy Red, where the boats made it ashore, the German resistance was heavy, owing to the multiple defensive positions that had been established there.

The other boats from E Company of the 16<sup>th</sup> and of F Company of the 16<sup>th</sup> landed mixed in with four boats from E Company of the 116<sup>th</sup> on Fox Green. They landed in front of the E-3 exit that led to Colleville. Here, the Germans had placed in one

strongpoint, two 75mm guns, two 50mm anti-tank guns, a 50mm mortar, numerous machineguns placed in pillboxes, along with open fire pits and trenches for infantry to fire from.<sup>33</sup> According to author Samuel Morrison, “Exit E-3...was heavily defended, and many a GI who landed there ended up in the Saint-Laurent cemetery that now overlooks the beach.”<sup>34</sup>

Joseph Dragotto was one of the men who landed on Easy Red.

“The craft next to us hit a mine and exploded, sending bodies into the water, and our craft hit the beach, but it was not the beach—it was a sandbar. I hit the water and had to wade about one thousand yards before hitting the real beach. When we hit the beach, I knelt down, kissed the dirt, and whispered, ‘Thanks’.”<sup>35</sup>

Fox Green was a heavily defended beach and the emplacements that guarded it were similar to those that protected Dog Green to the west. The men of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 116<sup>th</sup> who landed there came ashore under heavy fire that decimated their landing craft and destroyed their unit integrity. The men who landed there were confused and shaken by the heavy fire that met them, and also by the fact that the sixteen tanks of the 741<sup>st</sup> that were to have been landed there were not in sight.

Companies I and L that were slated to land on Fox Green did not. Instead, some of the men from Company L were accidentally landed to the right of Fox Green on the “empty” beach code-named Fox Red. There, minus two boats that had swamped on the way in, the men of L Company struggled ashore under moderate resistance. The men of I Company were even farther off target. They had traveled past Fox Green and Fox Red to Port-en-Bessin. It was ninety minutes until they touched down on Fox Green.<sup>36</sup>

Albert Mominee, an infantryman in Company I, recalls the following:

“It seemed to me that we were going in circles...[the coxswain] got close enough for us to land and he lowered the ramp, and a machinegun, which had been well concealed opened up...”<sup>37</sup>

The landing of the infantry of both the 116<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> had gone awry. Of all of the assault groups who were scheduled to touch down on D-Day, only one company landed where it was supposed to land. Almost in recognition of this fact, the Germans mauled this one company to the point that its combat efficiency was destroyed along with most of its men.

Why did so much go wrong for the infantry landings? What could have been done better to pave the way for the men who were to touch down in the first wave of the assault on Omaha? There are many imponderables surrounding the assault on Omaha Beach, but one thing is known—the assault succeeded regardless of the heavy casualties that the infantrymen incurred. The initial landing had, for all intents and purposes, been a failure. According to one report, “few if any troops actually crossed the beach during the early hours of the forenoon.”<sup>38</sup>

The casualties on Omaha Beach were horrendous. Men were torn apart by rockets, artillery, machineguns and small arms. The landing craft, which were not suited for the conditions that they met, were often times swamped. The heavily laden men were sometimes forced to wade through deep water under the constant fire of German guns. Many men died before they even touched the shore or fired a single shot in their own defense.

All of this was due to the strong defenses that lined Omaha Beach, and the fact that these defenses had been left intact by the ineffective pre-invasion bombardments. The infantrymen had followed their orders and had gone ashore, all the while expecting



to encounter minimal resistance. However, those men who did manage to touch down were faced with fire that could not be imagined, nor understood, by anyone who was not there with them. It must truly have been something like a vision of hell. There would have been fire and pain all around. The men, or in reality, teenagers and Twenty-somethings, who fought and died on Omaha did so with bravery that will be forever remembered.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 5

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- <sup>1</sup> Ginman, Randolph A. Written Testimony of His Experience on June 6, 1944. pgs. 10-11
  - <sup>2</sup> [Operation Report Neptune: Omaha Beach-26 Febuary-26 June 1944]. pg. 80
  - <sup>3</sup> Bradley. pg. 237
  - <sup>4</sup> Morrison. pgs. 136-138
  - <sup>5</sup> Chandler, David G., and James Lawton Collins, Jr. The D-Day Encyclopedia. New York: Simon and Schuester, 1994. pg. 244
  - <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 571
  - <sup>7</sup> Ryan. pg. 199
  - <sup>8</sup> Report C.B. 004385A. [Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief]. pg. 131
  - <sup>9</sup> Holderfield, and Varhola. pg. 144
  - <sup>10</sup> Lewis. pg. 11
  - <sup>11</sup> Gawne. pg. 88
  - <sup>12</sup> Lewis. pg. 11
  - <sup>13</sup> The above weights of the guns mentioned comes from—Hogg, Ian V. The American Arsenal. London: Greenhill Books, 2001. pgs. 229 and 231
  - <sup>14</sup> Lewis. pg. 11
  - <sup>15</sup> Ginman, Randolph A. Written Testimony of His Experience on June 6, 1944. pg. 10
  - <sup>16</sup> Report C.B. 004385A. [Report by the Allied Naval Commander-In-Chief]. pg. 57
  - <sup>17</sup> Morrison. pg. 120
  - <sup>18</sup> Harley A. Reynolds. Written Testimony of His Experience on June 6, 1944. pg. 8
  - <sup>19</sup> Tute, Costello, and Hughes. pg. 190
  - <sup>20</sup> Ginman, Randolph A. Written Testimony of His Experience on June 6, 1944. pg. 10
  - <sup>21</sup> Ryan. pg. 196
  - <sup>22</sup> Saunders. pg. 150
  - <sup>23</sup> Morrison. pg. 136
  - <sup>24</sup> Drez, Ronald. Voices of D-Day. Louisiana: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1994. pg. 202
  - <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 202
  - <sup>26</sup> Baldwin, Hanson W. Battles Lost and Won. New York: Konecky and Konecky, 1966. pg. 272
  - <sup>27</sup> Morrison. pg. 136
  - <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 136
  - <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 136
  - <sup>30</sup> Drez. pg. 206
  - <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 207
  - <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 212
  - <sup>33</sup> Saunders. pg. 150
  - <sup>34</sup> Morrison. pg. 137
  - <sup>35</sup> Drez. pg. 239
  - <sup>36</sup> Morrison. pg. 138
  - <sup>37</sup> Drez. pg. 239.
  - <sup>38</sup> COMINCH P-006. "Amphibious Operations: Invasion of Northern France, Western Task Force. Ch 4, pg. 7.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Even though the initial landings on Omaha were nothing short of a fiasco, they succeeded. By around 11:30 in the morning, scattered pockets of German resistance began to surrender to the American infantrymen. The German defenders and the American assault forces were both weary and in a state of shock that resulted from the intense and seemingly endless killing that took place. Bodies washed in and out in the tide, the water was stained red with the blood of the dead and the dying, and dead fish, which had been killed by the failed rocket attacks and by German artillery rounds that pounded the water, lay along the blood soaked beach.

The men who had made the initial assault were reinforced by men of the 115<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> RCTs. These reinforcing waves also suffered heavy casualties on the beach, and also came ashore under the muzzles of the German guns. Unlike the men who made up the first wave, the men of the reinforcing waves knew what lay ahead of them. From their landing craft they could hear the din of the battlefield; the whine of incoming artillery shells, the whistle of rockets landing on the beach, the steady tearing sounds emitted from the muzzles of German machineguns. They could see the dead bodies floating, and could see the half drowned crews of the DD tanks and the infantrymen whose landing craft had either foundered or been sunk, bobbing on the surface begging them to stop and pick them up. Still, the orders were to go in, and to go straight in without stopping.

The commanders, Huebner, Gerhardt, Gerow and Bradley, all clung to their radios throughout the entire morning. None of them knew what was happening to their

men. Smoke obscured the beach, and the ships that they sailed on could only advance on the beach up to a certain distance. The assault had taken too long. By 8:30, the men had been expected to have broken through the German defenses<sup>1</sup>, yet 8:30 came and went and the carnage continued on Omaha. Gerow, the V Corps Commander, anxiously awaited communications from his men ashore. He had not trusted the plan, yet he had gone along with it, and now he was fully aware of how his men were suffering at the hands of German obstacles and guns that had not been touched by the aerial bombardment, or had not been destroyed by the engineers who had only been given a short amount of time in which to remove them.

The beach exits had not been blown by 12:00, and the vital holes in the obstacle belts still existed. Seeing this, Bradley considered diverting the remnants of the reinforcing waves to Utah Beach, where they could more easily make it ashore and into the Normandy countryside.<sup>2</sup> Then, at 1:30 in the afternoon, word came from V Corps—"Troops formerly pinned down on beaches...advancing up heights behind beaches."<sup>3</sup> At 3:00, G Company of the 16 RCT was able to send men through the E-3 exit into Colleville where they began the process of seizing vital coastal towns.<sup>4</sup> The men who were fighting on the beach had somehow managed to make it ashore, even in the face of such tremendous enemy resistance.

At 1:30, Chester Hansen, Bradley's assistant, was sent ashore to report on the progress of the beach. He reported in his diary all that he saw:

"There on Omaha Beach lay a heavy pile of rubble with the wrecked boats, their backs broken in the low water. There were innumerable tetrahedrons\*, hedgerows with teller mines fastened to

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\* Tetrahedrons were the asterisk shaped metal obstacles.

the tops of the steel iron obstacles.<sup>†</sup> Work was proceeding slowly in the removing of these obstacles...There were a score of dead troops lying on the beach, sprawling and wet, lying where they had fallen. No one had as yet collected the dead...Floating near-by in the water we saw one body with a leg blown off...”.<sup>5</sup>

The beach was a mess, yet the men were slowly making their way up the bluffs and into the countryside. The work of noncoms and junior officers had paid off; ragtag groups of men who were not from the same companies or assault groups were working together to climb the bluffs and rout the German emplacements. The plans had failed, yet the sheer tenacity of the American soldiers paid off.

Bradley himself felt that the choice to use the 1<sup>st</sup> I.D. was probably what saved the day. He, like so many others, thought that the presence of the now infamous German 352<sup>nd</sup> Division would have easily decimated any other American division. Yet, he had chosen the Big Red One, and had therefore, ensured victory. “Unjust though it was, my choice of the 1<sup>st</sup> to spearhead the invasion probably saved us Omaha Beach and a catastrophe on the landing.”<sup>6</sup>

This author considers this statement debatable. Yes, the Big Red One did succeed, but it was also joined in its success by the untested 29<sup>th</sup> I.D., which in this author’s opinion faced more fire and more concentration of German troops than did the 1<sup>st</sup>. The 29<sup>th</sup>, the untested division, had been given four beaches to land and fight on, while the 1<sup>st</sup> had been given three beaches under its control with only two to land on. No wonder the 1<sup>st</sup> had more success than the 29<sup>th</sup>. Yes, Easy Red was a heavily defended beach, but nothing on Omaha matched the sheer carnage, the mayhem, of Dog Green. The German defenders on that one beach nearly cost the 29<sup>th</sup> its foothold on Europe. Had

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<sup>†</sup> The hedgerows that Hansen speaks of may be the iron obstacles known as “Belgian Gates”. These were gate-like obstacles that allowed the water to pass through them so that the tide did not push them over.

the landing craft of the 29<sup>th</sup> not gotten lost and swept eastward, they would have landed in perfect order on Dog White, Dog Red and Easy Green. Had this occurred, the men who landed on Dog White, a beach that saw no troops of the first wave land on it, would have been massacred along with the Rangers and men of Company A on Dog Green.

The mayhem on the beach was caused by the German defenses and defenders. The main problem was the fact that the Germans had been so well prepared and so well dug in when the landing craft touched down. The infamous German 352<sup>nd</sup>, as mentioned earlier, was not a crack division. To reemphasize a point made in the first chapter, it was made up of men who had fought and been wounded on the Russian front, and who had been sent to the static Western Front to recuperate and reorganize. Many German soldiers who had served in the East, and had been sent to the Western Front suffered from frostbite or other debilitating conditions that prevented them from serving as effective soldiers on the Eastern Front.

The 352<sup>nd</sup> was a division that was best suited for rapid counterattack inland and not on the water's edge. The mythical status that now surrounds it is not undeserved, but is mostly due to the fact that the American generals who were present at the landings were so shocked to see the 352<sup>nd</sup> at Omaha, causing such damage, that the defenders immediately became known as a crack division. Had they been encountered for the first time during the inland battles and not on D-Day where they were not expected, they would probably have been regarded as a veteran and battle-tested division but not a crack division, such as the Waffen SS.

In the opinion of this author, the presence of the 352<sup>nd</sup> definitely had an impact on the landing at Omaha. To place most of the blame for the devastation that took place on

them, and not equally on the ineffective bombardments and strict timetable, however, is convenient and incredulous. The Americans had every advantage on their side when they made the landing. They had the luxury of choosing the time and the place of the assault, along with the intricate details of the invasion. Yes, this is easy to say in hindsight, but it is true. The majority of the German commanders did not expect the invasion in Normandy, nor did they expect it at daybreak.<sup>7</sup> When the invasion did finally occur, the German commanders felt that it was merely a feint and not the main thrust.

According to an interview given while Field Marshals Keitel and Jodl were in prison awaiting their trials at Nuremberg, the Germans were shocked that the Allies landed where they did. "...we thought that debarkation on the open coast could only take place very slowly, much more slowly than in fact happened, and that in particular the rough water would cause serious delays."<sup>8</sup>

It is not the author's contention that the assault on Omaha was a failure. To the contrary, it was a success, but the casualty rate was far too high when compared to the other beaches. When the casualties collected from all of the other beaches are combined, the number is 2148 men wounded or killed. The casualties, according to an Army report, on Omaha were over 3000.<sup>9</sup> How is this possible? It was not simply due to the fact that the Germans defending Omaha were crack divisions; it was, in the opinion of this author, because the naval and aerial bombardments had been too short and had been misdirected.

The bombers that were present at Omaha dropped their bombs up to three miles away from the beach. The infantry had been assured that when they touched down, the beach would be littered with holes for protection and that they would find the German positions in ruins. Instead, they found German artillery that was uncannily accurate and

machinegun fire that swept the entire beach. There were no holes to hide in and the obstacle belts had not been penetrated by the high explosive bombs.

The naval forces had done their best to destroy the German emplacements, but the fact remains that the large guns of the *USS Texas* and the *USS Arkansas* were busy firing at targets inland and not on the beaches themselves. The use of heavy guns to pummel the German emplacements would have greatly altered the initial landings. Yes, the fleet needed to be protected by the battleships, but once it was seen that the fleet was not taking much fire at all, the battleships should have joined the cruisers, destroyers, and LCGs in pummeling the beaches.

Once the invasion began, there are not enough accolades possible to be given to the men aboard the destroyers who ran their ships aground to assist the belabored infantry. These men and their ships may have helped save the day, and may have made the invasion possible. Even Bradley's Big Red One needed the close support of the destroyers to make it up the bluffs.

It is not possible to point a finger at the lack of armored support on Omaha. The men aboard the D.D. tanks did their best. It is true that their tanks were not seaworthy and were unsound in the conditions that they met on D-Day. Even though many tanks sank in the Channel, the crews of the surviving tanks kept on trying to make it ashore. The tank crews knew that the infantry were relying on their help, even as the seas were swallowing up their fellow tanks.

Another group who is above criticism is the engineers. They acted bravely on D-Day. They were landed in the wrong places at the wrong times, yet they attempted time and again to blow holes in the obstacle belts while remaining under constant enemy fire.



Their landing craft, which were loaded down with tons of explosives, were floating death traps, and they themselves were choice targets for the Germans waiting above. Even though this was the case, they managed to destroy many obstacles and open a few exits without most of their equipment.

Finally, the infantrymen who came ashore did so under some of the most adverse conditions of the entire war. They were scattered by the current and scattered by German bullets. Their officers were killed, and many infantrymen were wounded; yet they managed to pull together to climb up the bluffs. They managed to overcome overwhelming odds even though they had been promised an enemy in a state of shock. There were no large concentrations of armor present to help them, and there were no holes to hide in. There were only German pillboxes and dead bodies. The only protection that they could find was the obstacles that had been placed on the beach to kill them, or the natural seawall that stood against the base of the bluffs.

The high casualties must not be blamed on any of the actions of the infantrymen, but on the overall misguided plans that took place prior to the invasion. It was the infantrymen who had no say in how or when they were going to land. Those decisions were made on the top by men who would never touch down on the beaches in the face of enemy fire. It was these men, the planners, who did not take the weather into consideration. Nor did they take the initiative to consider that Montgomery might have been wrong when he thought that the aerial bombardment would eradicate the German resistance and open a door to the countryside beyond.

The assault on Omaha was a tragedy of errors. One error led to another, and in the end, over 3000 men were lost. It is hard to pinpoint exactly what the cause for the

high casualty rate was, but one thing is definite—it was and is not wise to plan an invasion of a well defended area, and to then base the plans on rigid timetables and untested weapons systems. The planned invasion of Omaha Beach did not resemble anything close to the event that unfolded on the early morning of D-Day. Had the invasion and the assault on Omaha been planned with the premise that things could, and probably would, go wrong, men like Bradley and Gerow would not have been forced to sit back and watch their men get slaughtered on a small strip of sand that many a young American man would come to know as his final resting place.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 6

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley. pg. 270

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 271

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 272

<sup>4</sup> [Operation Report Neptune: Omaha Beach-26 February-26 June, 1944]. pg. 95

<sup>5</sup> Hansen, Chester. Diary entry of June 6, 1944. pg. 7

<sup>6</sup> Bradley. pg. 272

<sup>7</sup> Liddel Hart, B.H. The Other Side Of The Hill. London: Cassel and Company LTD, 1951. pg. 404

<sup>8</sup> Hechler, Kenneth W. [Interviews with German Military Leaders 1945]. 23 July, 1945. Mondorf, Luxembourg. Both of the Field Marshals being interviewed were later executed after being found guilty on all four possible counts at the Nuremberg trial.

<sup>9</sup> Report No. 292, Army Operational research Group, "Comparison of British and American Areas in Normandy in terms of Fire Support and its Effects", August 1945. pg. 1

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